2025 BASKETBALL PREVIEW 2026

NOVEMBER 2025
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NATE SWEITZER

Sports Illustrated

The Rockets Are Ready to

LIFTOFF

KEVIN DURANT

Is the Ultimate Booster

BY *Chris Mannix*

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LINEUP

GREATER RAIDER?
Behind All-American JT Toppin, Texas Tech is a threat to improve on last year's Elite Eight run.

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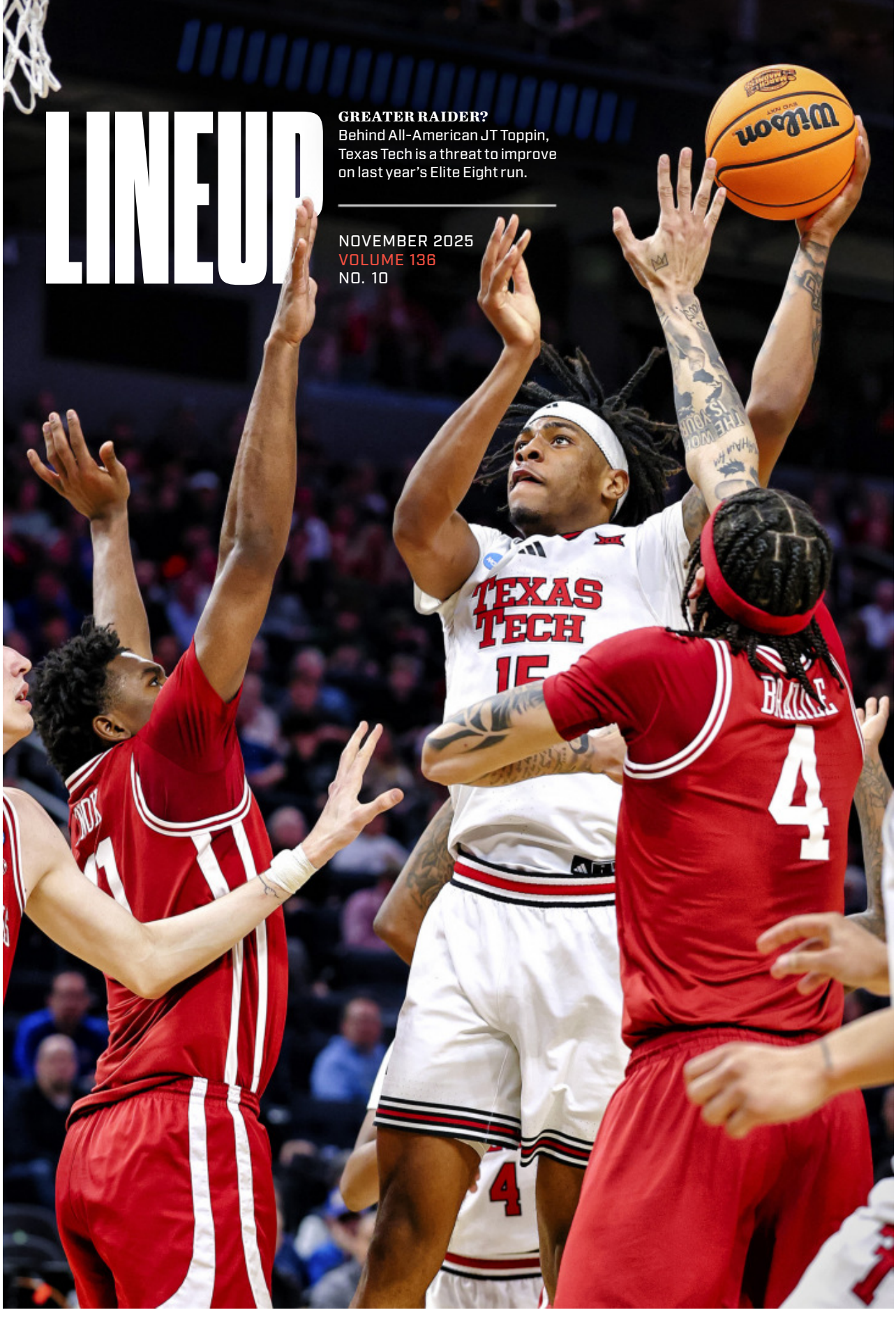

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NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

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SCORECARD

Styling by **Ilaria Urbinati** *at* **The Wall Group**
Grooming for Dwayne Johnson by **Rachel Solow**
Grooming for Mark Kerr by **Nadia Hoechlin** *for* **Exclusive Artists** *using* **Danessa Myricks Beauty**

ON JOHNSON:
Shirt by **ISAIA**
Trousers by **LUCA FALONI**
Belt by **BRUNELLO CUCINELLI**
Watch by **ROLEX**
Rings by **EMANUELE BICOCCHI**

ON KERR:
Henley by **DOLCE & GABBANA**
Jeans by **LEVI'S**
Watch by **IWC**

ESSAY

A Smashing Tale

A CLASSIC DOCUMENTARY ABOUT AN MMA FIGHTER GETS A FICTIONALIZED MAKEOVER—AND PLENTY OF STAR POWER

- BY L. JON WERTHEIM
- PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAY PATRICK McBRIDE

TRUE TO its name, *The Smashing Machine* is an exercise in brutality, full of crashes, fights and collisions leaving shards, both orthopedic and emotional. The 2002 documentary tour de force chronicles the rise and fall of Mark Kerr, d/b/a the Smashing Machine, a hard-on-the-outside, soft-on-the-inside Ohio fighter. Now comes the scripted version. Dwayne Johnson, d/b/a The Rock, plays Kerr in the film of the same name, which was released Oct. 3, and entered the fray carrying the distinct whiff of Oscar nominations.

The movie tells the story of Kerr, a hulking college wrestler who then launched a career in the punk rock sport of mixed martial arts. All was going, well, smashingly ... until it wasn't. Until he went from smasher to smashee. In an arresting early scene, Kerr sits in a doctor's waiting room, alongside other patients seeking bunion removals and strep throat swabs and the like. Kerr is seeing the doctor for another reason: He needs his face put back together.

This, though, is no formulaic sports biopic. It's less *Rocky* than *Leaving Las Vegas*, a journey of addiction, first to the adrenaline rush that comes with sanctioned violence—"When you win, nothing else in the world matters," Kerr says early in the film—then a compulsion for pain pills. This is also a story of relationships: a doomed romantic one; a fraught dynamic with a mentor, Mark Coleman, who is also an early-days MMA fighter; a personality reckoning with a sport that is both so intoxicating and so damaging.

Undergirding it all are two existential through lines: *When your reason for being is to do something physical, what happens when your body stops cooperating? When you believe you are indomitable, what happens when you experience defeat?*

The Smashing Machine also doubles as a time machine. Set in the late '90s, Kerr's story exists before MMA and the UFC had penetrated the defenses of the mainstream. This was a pre-Dana White, pre-pay-per-view (much less cable; much less cards set at the White House and broadcast on CBS) era, when a lack of rules and regulations was part of the outlaw appeal, and nothing could be said or written about the UFC without inevitably referencing John McCain's analogy to "human cockfighting." MMA was sanctioned in only a few states, and fighters were better off heading to Japan—as Kerr and Coleman did—to participate in PRIDE Fighting Championships events.

ROCK OF AGES
Johnson (far left) and Kerr have a relationship that stretches back to the 1990s, when they trained at the same California gym.

COURTESY OF A24

The first film directed solo by Benny Safdie—who usually tag-teams with his brother, Josh, in films including the insta-classic *Uncut Gems*—*The Smashing Machine* is faithful to the source material, the preceding doc and the legacy of Kerr. In addition to Johnson, Emily Blunt costars as Kerr's complicated love interest. An assortment of familiar MMA figures are featured as well, including former fighter Ryan Bader, who acquits himself well as Coleman.

One sentence review: The film nails it.

The large but also the small details, such as the foggy walk losing fighters must make from the cage to the dressing room ... and the genuine affection that passes between fighters who, minutes earlier, were beating the stuffing out of each other ... and the omnipresence of pain. When the film premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September, where Safdie was named best director, the audience reacted as if seeing a brilliant knockout, all open-mouthed *ooh*s and *aah*s and cheers during a prolonged standing ovation that left the principals in tears.

For all the fine bits of filmmaking and poignant storytelling, this is ultimately a Dwayne Johnson star vehicle. Johnson holds on to Kerr's character and never lets go. Similar in body type and disposition and born within a few years of each other, it's clear there was a kinship and connection between subject and portrayer.

In addition to the innumerable sessions they spent together preparing for the film, Kerr (now 56) and Johnson (53) sat down with SPORTS ILLUSTRATED for a no-holds-barred Q&A. (For more, go to SI.com.)

MEDAL METTLE
An NCAA champion wrestler, Kerr won his first UFC title in Birmingham in July 1997.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: Why was this the right film at the right time?

DWAYNE JOHNSON: I felt like there was some real connective tissue with Mark's life and my own. Sure, today. But in the '90s there were a lot of crossings in our worlds. There were a lot of pro wrestlers who then joined PRIDE. A lot of MMA guys came to wrestling. And I was always in awe of Mark.

As the years went by, we both suffered a lot of losses. We lost a lot of friends to addiction and to suicide—there was a rash in both of our businesses in those late '90s, early 2000s. When I watched the [*Smashing Machine*] documentary years ago, I had just started acting. I felt then, "God, I would love to play Mark Kerr."

Cut to 2019. I [buy] the project. I lock the rights down. We connect with Mark. I speak to Mark, whom I had known 20 years earlier. And it all started to come together. And I met with Benny. We agreed to do it in 2019. And then COVID hit and shut everything down. Mark went his way. Benny went his way. I went my way, trying to figure life out.

And years later, I realized how personal it was. I realized that I needed to tell this story, because I have a profound respect for Mark and MMA and all the men and women who give it up and leave it all in the cage or in the ring. But in addition to that, I felt that I needed to break free and make this kind of film where I could dive deep and I could test and challenge myself. And I could get really raw and rip myself open, with a costar, who I've known and been best friends with for many, many years in Emily Blunt.

SI: It was that personal?

DJ: Yes. It's turned into more than a movie. It represents me, ready to break out of the infrastructure that has surrounded me for a long time, making these big movies—that I've loved and they're fun—but I always felt there's a voice behind my rib cage telling me, "There's more, right? There's more to do."

SI: Mark, how'd he do? Did you recognize yourself?

MARK KERR: So the first time I walked on set, we're in this arena [in

FROM LEFT: ZUFFA LLC/GETTY IMAGES; ERIC ZACHANOWICH

Vancouver] and they're getting ready to do the introduction for the PRIDE Grand Prix. DJ is the last one to come in the ring. Nobody tells me he's getting prosthetics. Nobody tells me they're going to do this cauliflower ear. I'm looking in the ring and DJ's walking up behind me, and I turn around. All I could do is cuss at him. All I could do is just literally look at him and go, "Oh my God, dude. F--- you." It was this out-of-body experience.

My son saw [the film] in New York. He's almost like whispering on the phone, "Dad, he's got your hand movements, and he's got your speech pattern, he even walks like you. It was uncanny."

DJ: I felt like I had to do this. And this was the great challenge of my life, of my career…this was a very physical transformation. This guy's body is crazy. In his prime, he was 270-275 pounds, just a unicorn of a [body] with fast-twitch fibers. Benny said, "I don't know how to actually say this to you, but I think you're going to have to get bigger."

That's when I went into a 12-week training camp with MMA coaches and fighters to help the transformation. And [there was] the vocal transformation. Liz Himmelstein was

KERR SAYS SEEING JOHNSON IN CHARACTER WAS "THIS OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCE."

my vocal coach; she helped Emily on *Oppenheimer*. So she and I just studied Mark's speech pattern. Mark is this walking contradiction: a beast of a man, but also very soft-spoken, very caring. It was a lot to transform. But I loved every second.

SI: How much weight did you end up putting on in total?

DJ: Roughly 30 to 32 pounds, which is a lot of weight. But also I had to be able to move with that weight.

SI: Mark, what specifically made you nervous before you fought?

MK: Towards the end, I couldn't find that switch. When I first started fighting, I had to find something deep in me to flip a switch to inflict that much physical pain on somebody. In fighting, you have to have the ability to take something somebody doesn't want to give you: their will to win. I'm in the ring to inflict just enough pain and damage on you.

I watched film of myself walking down to the ring, and I couldn't recognize my facial expression and my demeanor. It was like this completely different personality and persona. I had to literally transform into a completely different person to get there, to inflict this much damage on a human being. I was like, *I just can't do this anymore.*

DJ: From my vantage point, you realize that there's the machine, and then there's the human being within the machine. And you also realize that it's not too dissimilar to our world of pro wrestling. And that's what I wanted to access with Mark.

I wanted to make sure that my delts and my traps looked like his. I felt moderately confident that we could nail the physicality part. But it's the emotional part that I wanted access to. Even in performative combat, like in pro wrestling, you've got the toughest of guys. But in the end, when it's done, it's done. And we have this [custom] where we hug and we say, "Thank you." I asked Mark about this. He would demolish these dudes, wreck them. But he'd also want to make sure that they were O.K.

"IF YOU WANT TO CALL IT A BROMANCE," KERR SAYS OF THE RELATIONSHIP, "YES, IT IS."

SI: Mark, what other little details did the film get right?

MK: Even in preproduction, they're putting together all the set pieces and costumes. I'd walk into a room, and it would just be screen grabs, pictures of me, pictures of my house, pictures of the clothes I wore. I could see why DJ completely got lost in the total immersion in that environment. I mean, they built four rooms in my house from 25 years ago.

SI: DJ, what nuance struck you about MMA as you immersed yourself and really saw how the sausage gets made?

DJ: The humanity of it. I've had the honor and privilege of being in performative combat where I can say to my opponent, "Take care of my arm tonight, take care of my knee. I'll take care of your back. Let's get through the night, and let's not get hurt. Let's get home to our family. Let's pay our bills." With this kind of combat, you don't have that luxury, and your life is on the line. That really moved me.

SI: I feel like there was a sub-theme in the film of fatherhood and lineage. I wonder if you guys bonded at all over your fathers, who I know both spent time on the road. And you guys are of a similar age.

DJ: We bonded over everything, brother.

MK: There's a lot of respect between us, man. So, yes, if you want to call it a bromance, yes, it is. □

SCORECARD: FULL FRAME

HEAD CASE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KOHJIRO KINNO

WITH HALLOWEEN approaching, the staff of Sports Illustrated Kids decided to create a creepy cover for its September/October 2025 issue. The concept involved Chargers quarterback Justin Herbert holding his own helmeted head under his arm.

To get the shots needed, photographer Kohjiro Kinno had to first get Herbert holding a helmet. Then he needed an image of Herbert wearing the helmet with an appropriately silly expression, making sure the head was in the proper position and lit perfectly. "We had five strobe lights on Herbert and any slight movement or change to the angles drastically affected the shot," says Kinno. "We also had filters on the strobes to give it a little color so we had to try a few variations until things looked right."

Of course, none of that would have mattered without a game QB. "Herbert stuck around so we could get more," says Kinno. "He was awesome to work with."

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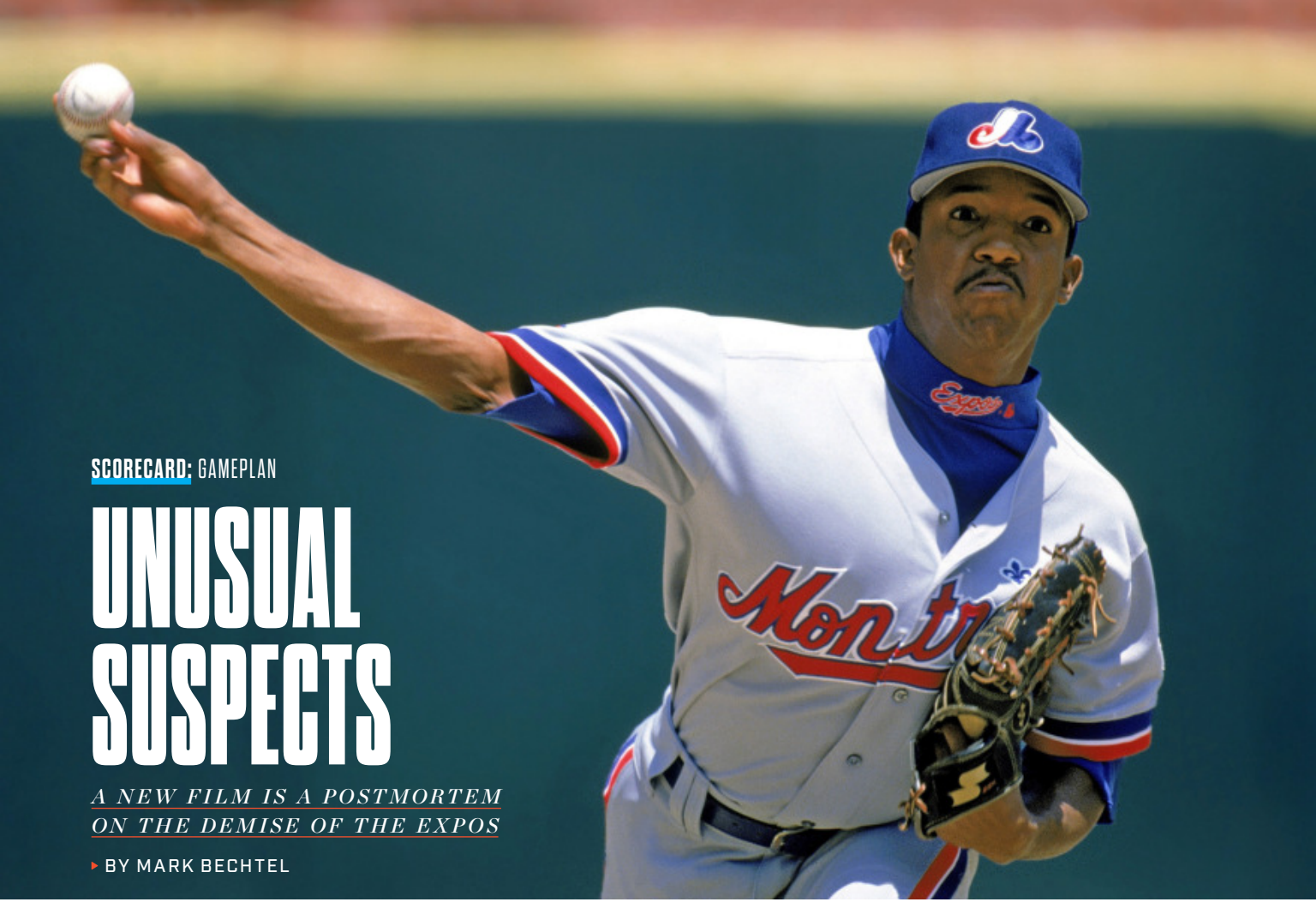


SCORECARD: GAMEPLAN

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

A NEW FILM IS A POSTMORTEM ON THE DEMISE OF THE EXPOS

BY MARK BECHTEL

A **NEW DOCUMENTARY** on Netflix asks a simple question, one that's right there in the title: *Who Killed the Montreal Expos?*

The 90-minute film offers several suspects: the 1994 strike, which upended MLB's financial landscape; local politicians who refused to fund a new ballpark; dysfunctional team officials who couldn't stop bickering long enough to figure out how to get a stadium deal over the finish line. The most compelling person of interest, though, is David Samson—the stepson of former owner Jeffrey Loria—who ran the franchise for a short spell before Loria sold the team for a tidy profit and invested in the Marlins, clearing the way for the Expos to become the Washington Nationals in 2005.

Samson told Dan Le Batard on a September podcast that he spent nine hours talking to the producers last year before only finding out recently the name of the film. "I had to call my had to call my agent, had to call my kids and say, 'I may have made a small mistake,' " Samson said with a laugh.

Samson's faux pas is the movie's gain; he's easily the most entertaining thing in it. He's not exactly a perp in the box (he appears to be in his very nice living room), but his talking-head segments are the closest thing we get to someone being grilled.

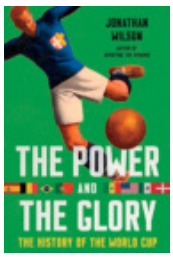
It's not easy to chew scenery in a documentary, but Samson does it to great effect. He seems to delight in being cast as the villain ("I never met anyone who liked him," one journalist says in the film) and then shooting down any and all arguments that he was single-handedly responsible. And he makes very valid points. There's clearly plenty of blame to go around.

If the doc doesn't deliver a smoking gun, it's still a fascinating ticktock of how teams are run. It also serves as a reminder of just how beloved the Expos were in a hockey-mad country. The sentiment is driven home in interviews with former players, such as Larry Walker and Pedro Martínez from the stacked 1994 team that was a World Series favorite before the postseason was canceled. Fans and reporters also speak, as does the guy who played the team's mascot, Youppi. Thirty years later, the actions of the responsible parties—whoever they may be—clearly still resonate in Montreal. □

WOE, CANADA Martínez, who was 11–5 before the strike in '94, was the rare Montreal star who survived a fire sale the next spring that gutted the club.

JEFF CARLICK/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

READ



THE POWER AND THE GLORY
by Jonathan Wilson

THE MOST celebrated book of the author Jonathan Wilson is certainly *Inverting the Pyramid*, a history of soccer tactics that is so thorough that it's used as a textbook by the fictitious Coach Beard on *Ted Lasso* as he attempts to grasp the finer points of the beautiful game.

Wilson's latest is every bit as detailed and just as sprawling. *The Power and the Glory* tells the history of the World Cup, with a chapter devoted to each quadrennial competition. The event's evolution is striking, from the let's-go-to-Uruguay-on-a-lark attitude that pervaded the first tournament, in 1930, to the politicization of the event in the next couple of decades, to the back-scratching and ludicrously huge backroom deals that have come to dominate the news cycle every time a new host is picked.

Wilson weaves in the bigger meaning of the tournament with the action on the pitch, which is delivered with his usual eye for observation. It's an ambitious task, writing about every installment of the world's biggest sporting event, but Wilson pulls it off—powerfully and gloriously. —M.B.

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FACES IN THE CROWD

▸ BY DAN FALKENHEIM

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RYLEE ERISMAN ▸ Sport: **Swimming** ▸ Hometown: **Windermere, Fla.**

Rylee, a junior at Windermere High, swam 52.79 in the girls' 100-meter freestyle at the 2025 world junior championships in Otopeni, Romania, winning gold and breaking the championship record for the third time at the meet. She also swam the opening leg in the U.S.'s world junior record-setting 4 × 100 freestyle relay (3:35.53) and finished the competition with five gold and three silver medals.

EMMA JIMENEZ PALOS ▸ Sport: **Cycling** ▸ Hometown: **Novi, Mich.**

Emma, a senior at the U.S. Performance Academy school, won the scratch race, an event in which all of the riders start together and race a set distance to the finish line, at the 2025 UCI junior world track championships in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. She also took silver in the individual pursuit event. A month earlier, she won junior national titles in the scratch race, individual pursuit, omnium and elimination.

JUSTIN RADEMACHER ▸ Sport: **Wrestling** ▸ Hometown: **West Linn, Ore.**

Rademacher, a redshirt sophomore at Oregon State, defeated Magomedgadzhi Magomedov of Russia by a 4–1 decision to win gold in the 97 kg weight class at the 2025 U-20 world championships in Samokov, Bulgaria. His win was one of five men's freestyle golds for Team USA, the most in U.S. history at a U-20 worlds. Rademacher, who won bronze at last year's event, won a senior Pan American title in May.

RUNNING

Top Doc

▸ **BEFORE SHE** ran Colorado's Leadville 100 Mile ultra marathon in August, emergency room doctor Anne Flower set three benchmarks. Her conservative expectation was to finish. Her stretch target was to complete the course in under 25 hours. Her dream goal was to place in the top three. A record wasn't on her mind. For good reason: She hadn't run more than 62 miles in any of her 12 previous races.

Even so, she would take the lead around mile 23, hold it through a peak elevation of 12,500 feet and finish in 17:58:19, winning the event and breaking the women's course record by eight minutes.

Three days later, she was back at work. (One of her colleagues joked she could have taken a *little* time off). Stopping isn't in her nature. Flower, 35, dove into running during her months working in the ICU as a medical student. She got hooked and realized she liked what came after the first 30 minutes, which led her to signing up for marathons and, eventually, ultras.

"In an ER, I'm constantly getting new and different information. That's similar to ultra running," says the Colorado Springs native. "Something comes up, you decide, make a decision and make it better. And then you continue to go." □

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF KYLE CASIAS; COURTESY OF NICOLA GRANNER; KARL MASDAAM/OSU ATHLETICS; COURTESY OF LIFE TIME

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It's go time. OKC will have its eyes on a repeat and Denver wants to show that last year's flop was a fluke, but there's an emerging power coming together down in Houston. And in the East, a few ill-timed injuries have set up what promises to be a wide-open NBA campaign

THUNDER STRUCK

MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (right) and Jalen Williams (left) brought Oklahoma City its first title, clinching against a depleted Pacers team that had to lean heavily on Pascal Siakam.

LAUNCH SEQUENCE

BY **Chris Mannix**

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SI IMAGING; CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES (DURANT); LOGAN RILEY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (UNIFORM)

BASKETBALL PREVIEW

NOVEMBER 2025
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Kevin Durant thought Phoenix would be his last career stop, but Houston offered something different: a deep roster, clear coaching vision and belief the dynamic scorer could ignite the Rockets and propel them to the NBA's final frontier

DURANT

Last May, as Rockets players shuffled across the locker room following a Game 7 loss in the first round to the Warriors, frustrations were palpable. By any metric, the 2024–25 season had been a success. The team won 52 games (up from 41 a year before) and made the postseason for the first time since 2020. The roster was teeming with young talent, guaranteeing that Houston, which had not been relevant since James Harden's acrimonious exit nearly five years ago, would contend for years to come. In that moment, none of it mattered. "I thought we could beat anybody," says Amen Thompson. "I was confident." He pauses. "Maybe *too* confident."

That confidence extended up the bench. In three seasons as a head coach, Ime Udoka had established himself as something of a wunderkind. He led the Celtics to the NBA Finals in his first—and only—season in Boston. He engineered a 19-win improvement in his first year in Houston. Last season, the Rockets finished with the second-best record in the West. Failure is a part of the process for every young team. But as good as Golden State was—and with Stephen Curry, Jimmy Butler and Draymond Green the Warriors were perhaps the greatest No. 7 seed *ever*—the 48-year-old coach believed his team could beat them. "We had what it took," he says. Addressing his players after the 103–89 loss that ended their season, Udoka's message was simple: *Don't be content with just making the playoffs. Everyone—coaches included—needs to come back better.*

Still, Udoka knew: There was a decent chance this would be the last time this group was together. For months, Houston had been engaged in trade talks with Phoenix for Kevin Durant. For nearly a year, executives from the Rockets and Suns had swapped proposals. They talked before the trade deadline. Nothing materialized. The Suns wanted the kind of players-and-picks haul they traded away to Brooklyn for Durant in February 2023. Houston had a budget for what it would give up, and it wasn't going to go over it. "We weren't shopping anybody," insists Udoka. "We were on that same page that we wouldn't overreact to one series. We knew some things could be available. But we planned on running it back."

It's a fine company line, but those who know Udoka insist—he wanted Durant. Their history dates back to Udoka's playing days, when Udoka was a sturdy, 6' 6" forward in San Antonio trying to figure out how to slow down this slim, 6' 11" scorer who played the same position. In 2016, when the Spurs made their pitch to Durant in free agency, Udoka was part of the group San Antonio sent to deliver it. The relationship deepened during the 2020–21 season, when Udoka served as an assistant in Brooklyn, and more when he took a coaching role with the U.S. Olympic team. The playoffs exposed the Rockets' need for half-court scoring. Durant is among the very best at it. "Obviously what he does on the basketball court," says Udoka, "fits with what we need."

Weeks into the offseason, though, there was no deal. Phoenix wanted Houston to sweeten its offer. The Rockets weren't budging. Rafael Stone, Houston's general manager, understood Durant's value. Durant was 36, and though his game was aging well—he averaged 26.6 points per game for the Suns last season, connecting on 43% of his threes—*he was 36*. If the deal didn't work out, Stone wanted to have enough assets left to be able to swing another.

And he knew he had leverage. With one year left on his contract, Durant had the power to cool the market. If he didn't want to be somewhere, no team was going to surrender anything significant to get him. And Durant wanted to be in Houston. Days before the draft, the two sides reengaged. Phoenix, unable to drum up a better offer, was ready to accept what the Rockets had on the table.

In early conversations with Durant, Udoka sensed the excitement. The end for Durant in Brooklyn was difficult. His two and a half seasons in Phoenix were uninspiring. Houston offered something Durant coveted most—a chance to compete. "I think he just saw an environment that he might not have had in his last few places," says Udoka,

ALL IN TOGETHER

Despite a bitter Game 7 loss in the first round of the postseason to the Warriors, the growth of the young core featuring Thompson, Eason and Şengün could be accelerated with Durant's arrival.

LOGAN RIELY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (2)

"and wanted to be part of it." Indeed, internally the Rockets wondered: If Durant was that good in those situations, just how good can he be in this one?

"I WANTED TO retire in Phoenix." It's mid-September and Durant arrives for an interview shortly after a workout at the Rockets' practice facility. It's Durant's first day back, having spent the summer ping-ponging around Europe. "It's a different vibe over there, man," says Durant, a sweat-soaked Rockets T-shirt clinging to his chest. Very, especially when your itinerary includes tagging along with Drake on the rapper's nine-country tour. There's a lot to get to with Durant. The *how* he got to Houston, the *why* he wanted to be here. First, though, Durant wants to emphasize something: The ending in Phoenix bothered him, too. "I really had good intentions when I stepped foot in there," he says. "The picture in your head doesn't always come to fruition."

This one didn't. Expectations were sky-high when the Suns acquired Durant, pairing the former MVP with Devin Booker, the homegrown star just two years removed from leading Phoenix to the Finals. Months later, the Suns swung another deal, acquiring Bradley Beal. The shake-up left the team with a formidable Big Three ... and little else. With a top-heavy rotation, Phoenix was swept out of the first round in the trio's first full season. It missed the playoffs entirely in the second.

A postmortem *could* trace the failure back to the Durant deal. Specifically, what Phoenix gave up—Mikal Bridges, Cameron Johnson and four unprotected first-round picks—to get him. Durant doesn't buy it. "I feel like I can make up for anything," he says. "Whatever you're losing." The Beal trade further limited Phoenix's ability to address what Durant says was the real problem: a lack of frontcourt muscle. "From a basketball standpoint, I felt like our best lineups were me at the five with four guards that were under 6' 5"," he says. "That's a horrible formula to win basketball games at a high level, especially when teams are consciously getting bigger. I think we can speak on a mental aspect of the game as much as we want, but I think that physical aspect of the game is why we weren't successful as a team."

LEAP OF FAITH

Thompson is considered to be one of the league's young stars in the making—he was named to the 2024–25 All-Defensive first team—with a chance for more accolades while stepping up for the injured VanVleet.

GREG NELSON

H-TOWN
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SPURS
5

There's no bitterness in Durant's voice. He made his peace with the Phoenix failure long ago. When the season ended—maybe a *little* before—Durant "canvassed the league" for good options. He wanted to play for a contender. Houston checked that box. He *didn't* want the team trading for him to have to gut its roster. The Rockets, armed with movable contracts and draft capital, ticked that box, too. And, says Durant, "I wanted to go back to Texas."

It has been nearly two decades since Durant lived in the state, back when he was a stringy 18-year-old who had rarely ventured out of the mid-Atlantic. Austin, where Durant enrolled at the University of Texas, was "a culture shock." The D.C. Metro was replaced by car pools in pickup trucks. Instead of mumbo sauce, barbecue. The regular family dinners. "Southern hospitality," says Durant, "is a real thing." The months he spent left a lasting impression. "It was a huge part of my DNA," says Durant. "That was probably the most enlightening year of my life."

Something else: The Rockets wanted *him*. "I think other teams valued growing their younger players and draft picks," says Durant. "I'm a veteran, [now] 37 years old, with a high price tag. Not a lot of people in the league wanted to make that move to change the franchise and add me to the equation." Udoka did, certainly, and Durant admired how the coach yanked Houston out of the ashes of the Harden era. Udoka, says Durant, "is just real and to the point. There's no sugarcoating." On Houston's staff are Royal Ivey and D.J. Augustin, Durant's teammates in Oklahoma City. "I felt like this team is on the brink of being a consistent playoff team," says Durant. "I wanted to be a part of it."

A *part*. Durant sees what you do: A team that struggled in isolation offense—the Rockets ranked in the bottom third of the NBA in points per possession in isolation and in scoring generated in the half court—is adding one of the greatest one-on-one scorers in NBA history. But he believes he can contribute much more. He sees his rebounding and

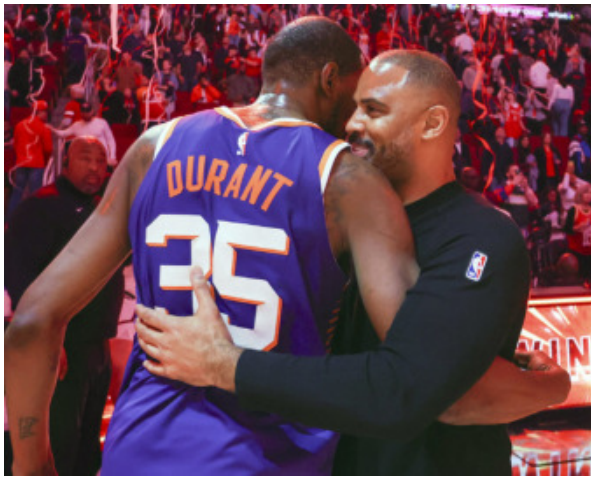
DURANT IS BOTHERED BY THE ENDING IN PHOENIX, TOO. "I REALLY HAD GOOD INTENTIONS," HE SAYS.

shot blocking making an impact. He sees his leadership influencing one of the NBA's younger locker rooms. He sees his versatility as a fit on a team that finished fourth in defensive efficiency last season. Udoka has toyed with the idea of playing Durant at two guard, part of a jumbo lineup featuring two centers (Steven Adams and Alperen Şengün) and 6' 11" Jabari Smith Jr. No small-ball issues there.

And he sees a team he doesn't have to carry. Thompson was All-Defensive first team last season and is widely considered a future All-Star. Şengün was an All-Star and is fresh off a breakout performance at EuroBasket. Smith, Tari Eason and Reed Sheppard have room to grow. Adams and Dorian Finney-Smith are veterans with postseason experience. For Durant, it creates "a margin for error."

"In Phoenix, everything had to work perfect for us," says Durant. "I felt like when we played well, we could compete with anybody in the league. But the great teams, they could make a couple of mistakes and their talent from top to bottom could mask that a little bit.

"We didn't have that type of room for error. And that was a little frustrating. It's not a bad place to be. I felt like we had a chance every night with the talent that we had, but I wish we had a little bit more room for mistakes. If you turn it over here, give up a rebound there—we couldn't allow that at all in Phoenix, so that was tough to deal with."



FROM LEFT: MARK BLINCH/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; THOMAS SHEA/IMAGN IMAGES

SOLAR FLARE

Udoka (above) is a familiar face for the 15-time All-Star after having been on the coaching bench when Durant played with the Nets in 2020–21 and at the Tokyo Olympics.

In Houston, the talent pool is both deep and diverse. Durant watched it develop the last two seasons. Not in a can't-wait-to-get-there kind of way. "I saw them as possible playoff [opponents]," says Durant. But he saw the skill. The execution. The relentlessness. "Stuff that championship teams do," he says. Now that he's here, he's eager to do whatever it takes to make them one. "I'm looking forward to just playing as freely as I can," he says. "And having some fun."

THOMPSON HAS never played with Durant. He has played *for* Durant. At 14, Thompson played for Durant's AAU team in a one-off experience. Then, in 2018, when Durant was with the Warriors, he chartered a plane for Thompson's AAU team at the time, Vision Sports Academy, to travel from Oakland to Las Vegas, handing out mock *SLAM* magazine covers with the players' faces on it. Eason wore Durant's shoes in high school and was glued to documentaries featuring him. "For almost as long as I can remember and knowing basketball and watching basketball," says Eason, "I've known about Kevin Durant."

Udoka is fine with the team admiring Durant, just not revering him. When the Rockets faced teams with superstars, Udoka pushed his players to believe they were equals. "It was always, 'Don't take a backseat to anybody,'" says Udoka. "Attack them and guard them the other way like they're a regular player." With Durant, he wants a similar approach. "It's not the Kevin Durant Show because he's here now," says Udoka. "The biggest growth is going to come internally, from our young guys."

For his part, Durant is eager to help. Last summer, Smith resolved to develop his one-on-one game. After the trade went down, Smith linked up with Durant in Houston for some individual workouts. No better model for a near 7-foot would-be isolation scorer than the greatest near 7-foot iso scorer who ever lived. Smith marveled at the precision of Durant's movements, his attention to detail, how every shot he took was at game speed. "He's a perfectionist," says Smith. "That really rubs off on you."

Durant embraces being the elder statesman. "Somebody who asks questions and wants to be guided, I get a joy out of that," says Durant. In the aftermath of Fred VanVleet's torn

right ACL—an injury that will likely keep the 31-year-old guard out for the entire 2025–26 season—Durant will have to assume an even larger leadership role. In Thompson and Sheppard, the No. 3 pick in the 2024 draft, Houston has the talent to replace VanVleet. It just needs to be molded.

It's a job, Durant says, he hopes he has for a while. If Phoenix was where Durant wanted to retire, now that's Houston. He's not looking for the next stop. He wants this to be his *last* stop.

"I'm looking to be here as long as I can, play my last years of my career," says Durant. "That's the intent. I know, I said that about Phoenix, too, but that's the intent. I would love to do that. I mean, I'm 37 years old and I'm going on 19 years in the league. I want to be solidified in a spot and build with a team with a group of guys that's going to be around for a while. So hopefully this is it."

Durant is careful not to put a clock on his career. Mostly because he doesn't see one. He's completely recovered from the blown Achilles that cost him the 2019–20 season. He played 75 games for the Suns two seasons ago. He averaged 36.5 minutes per game in the last one, when a variety of injuries limited him to 62 appearances. The 43% he shot from three was his best in a full season. He spends three or four hours in the gym in the morning, with recovery and film study in the afternoon. "There's a lot of stuff that I cut out as I got older," says Durant.

As Durant has aged, he has studied athletes who have achieved longevity. Vinny Testaverde, who retired from the NFL at 44. Vince Carter, who retired at 43. Alexander Ovechkin, who is still dominant at 40. He does what he calls "small dives" on their careers, reading articles, watching interviews, anything that might offer insight into their secrets. "Guys that play that long and kept that mental stamina and physical stamina to come in every day and want to get better, I mean you can't beat that," says Durant. "It's inspiring. You got to respect that."

BRANT BURKE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

SETTING THE BAR

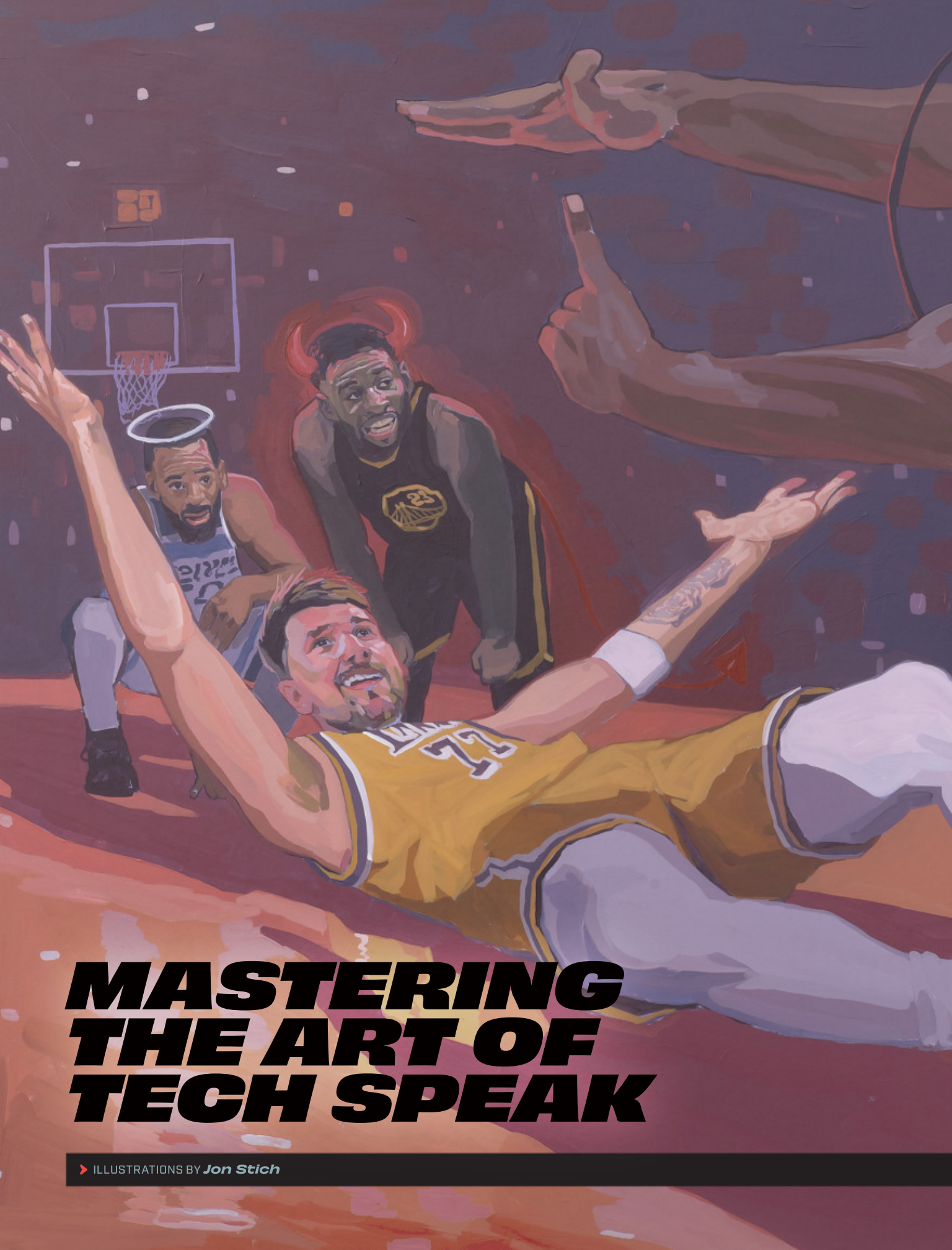
The Rockets have the pieces in place for success: Eason (left), who idolized Durant growing up; Şengün (below), who is on the verge of breaking out; and Smith (bottom), who will model his game after the great iso scorer.

In a way, Texas is where Durant's career began. It's where he first discovered himself as a scorer. "I just wanted to make it to the league," he says. He never dreamed of a two-decade career in the NBA, and despite racking up 15 All-Star appearances, two championships and an MVP, he's in no hurry to leave.

"I always want to be at that elite level, but when you're in your 40s, I mean you might as well just commit to playing till your wheels fall off," says Durant. "You might as well just maximize that time period. I'm getting older but I just feel like I got a lot to look forward to. I feel like I've done a lot as well. I'm content, but I want more, as weird as that sounds."

Not in Houston. After hearing of the trade, Thompson asked his parents to dig up the *SLAM* cover and send it to him. "Full-circle moment," says Thompson, smiling. There will be time for the Rockets to get any Durant awe "out of their system," says Udoka. After that, it's time to work. □

FROM TOP: TIM HEITMAN/GETTY IMAGES; ALEX SLITZ/GETTY IMAGES



MASTERING THE ART OF TECH SPEAK

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Jon Stich*

BY **Chris Mannix**

For every angelic Mike Conley, there's a slightly-less-angelic Draymond Green. But most NBA players fall somewhere in the middle, and many of them have the same question: Where's the line between spirited debate and technical-worthy behavior?

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
NOVEMBER 2025

IN 2014, during a mid-November regular-season game against Sacramento, Mike Conley heard something unfamiliar barked in his direction: "Technical foul." The then Grizzlies guard, seven-plus years into his pro career, had *never* been whistled for a tech and he was convinced that whatever he said in the direction of referee Monty McCutchen—"It wasn't anything more than, 'What?'" Conley says—didn't warrant the response. The NBA agreed, rescinding the technical the next day. "You could kind of tell in the moment that we both knew it probably shouldn't have happened," says Conley. McCutchen, who retired in 2017 and is now the NBA's head of development and training for referee operations, agrees. "It was," says McCutchen, smiling at the memory, "one of those nights."

It goes without saying—or at least it should—that NBA officials are elite. For all the bellyaching about the block/charge or the occasional out-of-bounds play, referees regularly get calls right. The NBA doesn't

release all of its accuracy numbers, but McCutchen says that errors are down year over year and that the 2024–25 season was "a successful year." Unsportsmanlike technicals—defined seven ways in Section V of the Fouls and Penalties portion of the NBA rule book, including "disrespectfully addressing an official"—have declined. During the '21–22 season, referees handed out 1,136 techs. Last season, that number was 889.

And the majority of interactions between officials and players and coaches are harmless. Friendly, even. Don Nelson telling Duke Callahan, "If you let me walk around as much as you did [Allen] Iverson I'd still be playing." (Callahan's response: "You think?") Ronnie Garretson telling Chucky Atkins after a scoring outburst, "Don't take this the wrong way, but I didn't know you were that good." Mark Wunderlich once gave a tech to Rockets guard Rafer Alston in the first half of a game after Alston threw a ball at him. At halftime, Houston coach Jeff Van Gundy noted the number of turnovers Alston had committed. "He said, 'You've been watching him play,'" says Wunderlich, who retired in 2011. "'You think he knows where he's throwing the ball?'"

McCutchen has his own story. He once slapped a technical on very well-known center who, irate, turned and called him a "white racist honky motherf---er." Years later, while attending NBA All-Star weekend, McCutchen crossed paths with the player in an elevator. McCutchen was with his wife ... who is Black. The big man, remembering the exchange, turned to McCutchen's wife and said, "Don't believe anything he says. I never said *that*."

Sometimes, though, interactions can turn ugly, often in a public way. Draymond Green, the NBA's ref critic-in-chief, was caught on camera late in Game 3 of Golden State's second-round playoff series suggesting the referees were calling fouls in order to cover a spread. In March 2023, Rockets guard Fred VanVleet said, "I think that most nights, out of the three [referees], there's one or two that just f--- the game up." Then last November, he was tossed for pointing at each official and telling them, "You suck." A few weeks later, Timberwolves star Anthony Edwards called a crew "f---ing terrible." The player who finished second to Edwards last year in technicals, Dillon Brooks (now with Phoenix), said in December 2023 that referee Suyash Mehta "shouldn't even be reffing our games" after Mehta ejected him following a profane tirade over a flopping call.

The most notable—and most visible—player-referee spat is between Chris Paul and Scott Foster. The 12-time All-Star has had several visible run-ins with Foster and has called the beef "personal." It's contributed to a perception that Foster is a bad ref, one the league, which regularly ranks Foster among its top officials, says is not based in fact. And it's made Foster a target of fan ire. Consider: After some shaky calls in Game 4 of last year's NBA Finals, Foster received a flood of online criticism, so much that Indiana coach Rick Carlisle defended Foster before Game 5. "I have yet to see [a referee] who believes they are bigger than the game," says McCutchen. "Referees want to do a good job;

they want to get plays called correctly and they would prefer not to be part of the narrative."

The relationship between players and referees needs work, says Morgan Cato, the executive vice president of player operations at the NBPA. In her role, Cato regularly speaks to players about officiating. "When we get feedback, [we find that] communication and interaction are a big area of focus," says Cato. "Mostly it's the behaviors they don't like to see. The dismissiveness. The curt hand gesture or the resistance to make eye contact. Mutual respect is what they are looking for."

For coaches, it's clarity. Last April, after Luka Dončić was ejected from a late-season game against Oklahoma City, Thunder coach Mark Daigneault waved referee J.T. Orr over to ask what the Lakers' star did to earn it. Orr, Daigneault immediately recalled, had slapped the player with a technical weeks earlier, in Sacramento, and Daigneault wanted to bank in his mental file what he couldn't say. "I always ask the officials what they say," says Daigneault. "Because I'm trying to calibrate where the line is."

For the league, addressing these issues is a priority. Commissioner Adam Silver says he has had "intensive conversations" with players association executive director Andre Iguodala about the state of the player-referee dynamic. He's sought real-time feedback from players and coaches about interactions. "On one hand, I think the state of the relationship between players and referees has been as good as any time during my tenure as commissioner," says Silver. "On the other hand, I also think there's room for improvement on how players and referees interact on the floor."

After 30-plus years in officiating, McCutchen is a fierce defender of referees, though he acknowledges effective communication is a work in progress. "We work really hard to get our staff to understand that no communication is as bad as bad communication," says McCutchen. With consequences. On-court clashes can fuel the perception of bias, which hurts the game. It can also put referees in the literal crosshairs: Families of officials have been threatened on social media. According to McCutchen, on several occasions police have been called to protect referees' homes. Finding ways to take down the temperature is in everyone's best interest.

ORE THAN a decade after his first technical foul was rescinded—and 18 years, 1,280 games (including playoffs) and 40,218 minutes into his NBA career—Conley still has not picked up another one. It has made him something of a referee whisperer. "I just think it's my personality," says Conley. "Even when there's heated moments, I can calm myself

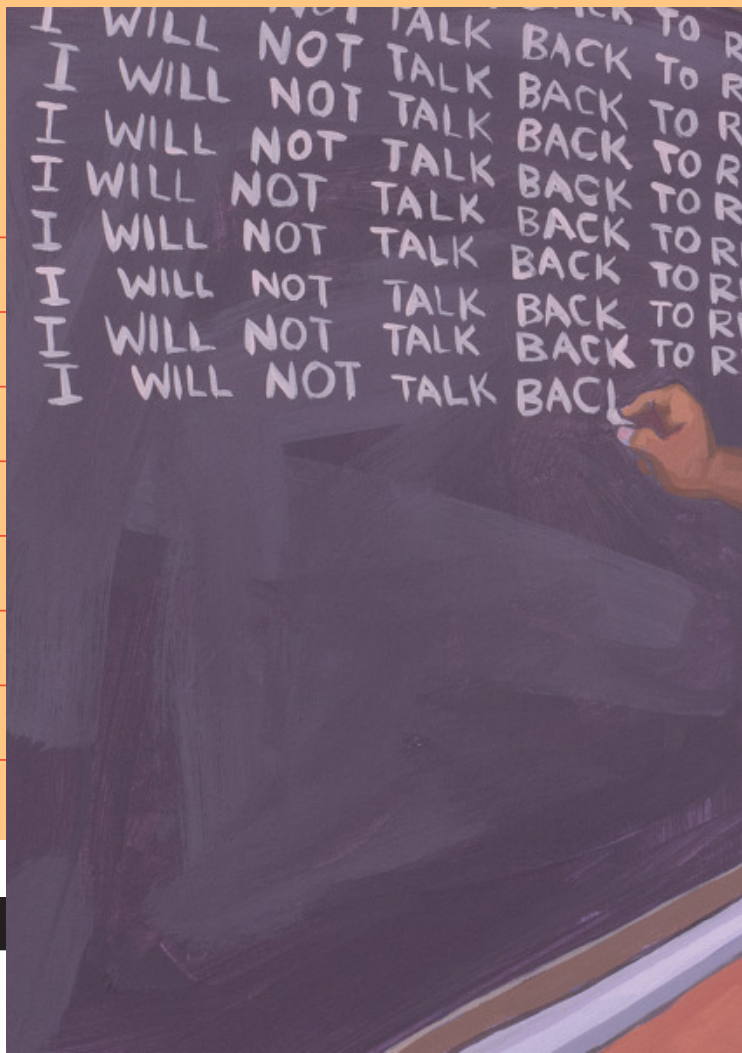
to talk in the right way instead of getting degrading or calling names, getting crazy."

How you initiate the conversation is key, says Conley. Temperament matters. "Don't go in hot," he says. Knowing there is nothing that will change the call, point to similar contact happening at the other end. And know when the conversation is over. "The more you talk, the more you are getting on somebody like that, the more likely they are probably not going to do what you want them to do," says Conley. "So it just becomes that kind of dialogue when you're talking to them."

Recognizing when to initiate a conversation is equally important. Live ball situations are out. "Too much going on," says Callahan, who retired in 2019. Halftime is an ideal opportunity for a back-and-forth. "We look at plays at halftime," says Wunderlich. "And we can give an honest response." Dead ball situations are fine—to a point. "I didn't care if a player talked to me all night long," says McCutchen. "But if you are complaining on every call, I have to put an end to it. We have to be able to concentrate and do our work."

While referees are after a more civilized discourse, so are the people they're talking to. "Players just want the communication to be at the utmost level," says Hornets forward Grant Williams, a vice president of the players association. "That way, they trust the official is going to make the call that they're supposed to make." In 2024, the NBA named Ariel Bernstein, an organizational psychologist, as its director of referee performance and development. Bernstein's objective, says McCutchen, is to improve how officials communicate. "It starts with explaining yourself through the rule book," says McCutchen. Bernstein has coached refs to listen, maintain eye contact and to make players feel heard. "As a referee, you don't need the last word and you definitely don't have to 'win,'" says Wunderlich, now a VP of referee operations. "Only thing you have to do is get people back to playing."

THE MORE A PLAYER TALKS, THE MORE LIKELY THE REFS ARE TO NOT DO WHAT HE WANTS THEM TO.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Referees, notes Silver, are "following the rules and the interpretation set forth by the league office." There are certain actions they *have* to call. Wave your hand at an official? That's a tech. Clap at one? That's another. Slap the stanchion in frustration. You are going to get whistled. These are rules that are constantly evolving. For example: Silver says the league recognizes the need to allow players to show more emotion without fear of getting T'd up for it. "I think we may have gotten to a point where we had disallowed some of the spontaneous emotion on the floor and created some bright line leading to technicals that I think were not necessary to control the game and not the official's fault," says Silver. "I think that's the league office's fault."

What can trigger incidents is what players see as a lack of consistency. "What we are hearing is, 'Night after night, no matter who the crew is, can I make sure I'm going to get consistent calls?'" says the NBPA's Cato. "No matter who the official is, young or old, in the East or West, can I have consistency?"

A particular pain point is how postseason games often are called by a different rule book. "The games are called differently," says Conley. "Early in the year you might get a lot more ticky-tack calls, more free throws that are based off of points of emphasis for that particular year. And then halfway through the year, the point of emphasis isn't emphasized and they go back to a little bit more of what we're used to. And then you get closer to the playoffs, and now you're tackling each other and clotheslining each other and some things aren't being called.

"It's like, *At what level are we trying to get used to knowing what we can and can't get away with?* Guys are really good at manipulating the game and whatever the rules are at the time, and you just build around it as opposed to constantly changing and not knowing what you're getting."

To that end, players have pushed for a voice in which officials work the playoffs. Currently the NBA chooses the 36 postseason referees based on the league's grading system and other metrics. That list is whittled to 12 for the Finals. Cato says there has been "good movement" towards developing a process that allows the rank and file to have input in the selections. "I think there's value in it," says Williams. "Because then if we complain about [referees], the league can say, 'Hey, you had a seat at the table.'"

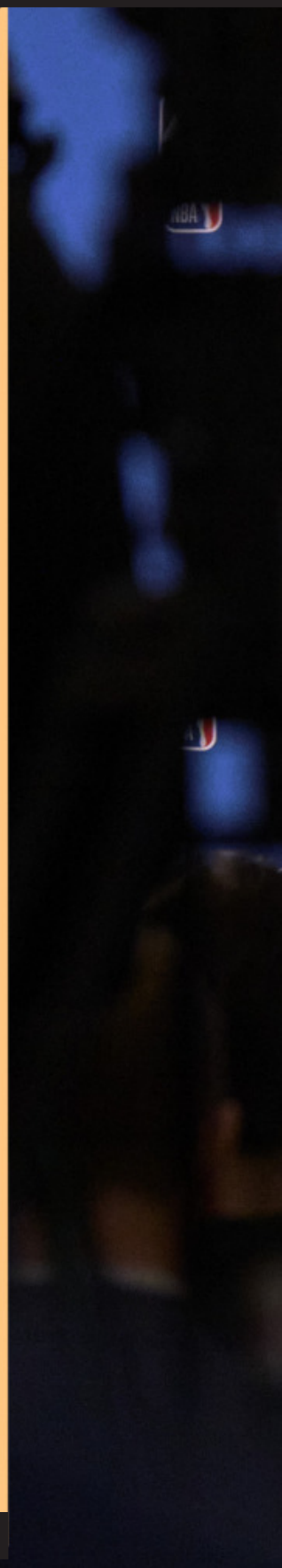
There will always be incidents. Mistakes will happen, like McCutchen's quick whistle on Conley years ago. "I hit Avery Johnson, too, by the way," says McCutchen, laughing. "Another nice guy." The goal is to get to a place of constructive dialogue that minimizes them. "Cracking the code," says McCutchen, "is really as simple as learning how to disagree." □

BY
Chris Mannix

STATE OF THE GAME

Commissioner Adam Silver begins the 2025–26 NBA season fighting for fans' attention with an active salary-cap circumvention probe into the Clippers, a new broadcast deal introducing NBC and Amazon while saying goodbye to TNT, and another All-Star Game format

PHOTOGRAPH BY
Erick W. Rasco



AMONG THE things Adam Silver expected to be dealing with in his 12th season as NBA commissioner, an alleged case of salary cap circumvention involving one of the NBA's best players, its wealthiest owner and a bankrupt climate-conscious financial services company wasn't one of them. At least not until an episode of the *Pablo Torre Finds Out* podcast implicated Clippers owner Steve Ballmer in an alleged scheme to skirt salary rules by funneling money through a firm that sold carbon offsets before the company went belly-up. (Ballmer denies the team circumvented the cap.) "This was not something that was on our radar," says Silver. "We will get to the bottom of it."

While Silver has shifted the Clippers' case to Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, its go-to law firm for sticky investigations, he still has plenty on his plate. The league's new national broadcast deal has fans scrambling for channel guides. The failing of regional networks has more reaching for their wallets. Internally, the NBA continues to debate the value (or lack thereof) of expansion, the future of the All-Star Game and how to keep sports gambling from infecting the integrity of the game. Silver addressed all that and more in his annual State of the NBA sit-down with SPORTS ILLUSTRATED.

NBA

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: You said you wanted to see the "totality of the evidence" before making any judgment on whether or not the Clippers intentionally circumvented the salary cap. Some team executives are asking what you need to see to determine if the team cheated?

ADAM SILVER: Somebody asked me if circumstantial evidence is enough, and just as in a court of law, sometimes there's direct evidence and sometimes there's circumstantial evidence. And certainly, circumstantial evidence alone doesn't prevent findings for one particular side. But then, even in the case of circumstantial evidence, you look at the totality of the circumstances. So it's not formulaic. We will look at everything that's presented to us, and that includes inferences that come from evidence as well.

SI: Do you expect this to be a long investigation?

AS: I really don't know. I can say it will take some time, just based on past experience. From the reporting so far, many of the sources are anonymous, but there are several of them. And you have here a separate court proceeding. We have a guilty plea [by Aspiration cofounder Joe Sanberg for wire fraud]. So there's a fair amount of evidence for us to look at. The stakes are very high here. We, as a league, want to be careful and make sure that not only are we being fair to the Clippers and Steve Ballmer, but also that we have a true understanding of whatever happened here.

SI: The national broadcast deal that ended TNT's package and brought in NBC/Peacock and Prime Video was a windfall: 11 years, $77 billion. But critics—like Charles Barkley—have said that the fragmentation will be damaging. That the deal is anti-fan. What would you say to that?

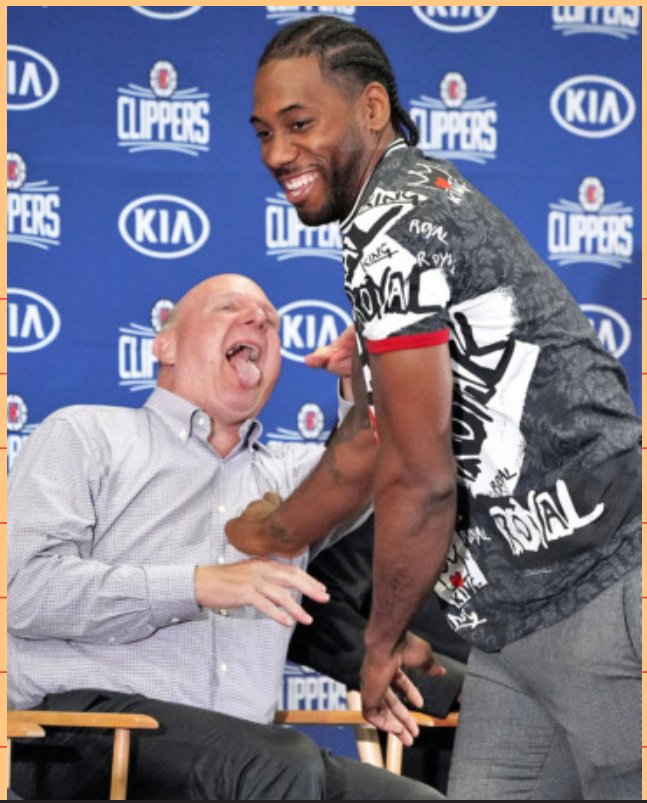
AS: I accept Charles's point that there will be disruption in the short term. I think, over time, technology is clearly our friend here. Just by way of example, through the NBA app, which is free to download, you will be able to have a front door into every game on any service that's carrying the NBA. We recognize the transition will be an issue and for fans who are used to finding the NBA on TNT. Obviously, we won't be there.

We need to help direct them to where our games will be located. I also think there's an ongoing shakeout in the media industry. There will be, no doubt, additional aggregation of some of the streaming services now. I think it's too early to conclude how easy or not it'll be for consumers. My sense is that over time the consumer/fans generally win in a market economy. And the market and the media companies will respond to what the fans want. Because it's of course not in our interest to create services that fans find it too difficult to subscribe to.

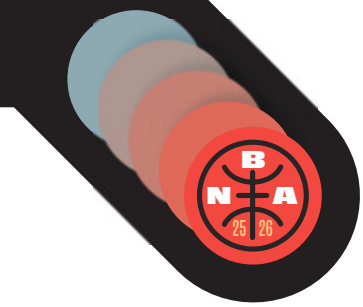
I don't want to be Pollyannaish. I mean, the fact that we're going from one paradigm that had been in place now for two decades and are going to be adding two new partners and replacing one, we're going to have to reeducate the fans on where to find the games. Also, as part of ESPN's app, they made a company decision that they wouldn't only promote their own networks. This goes to the point of a competitive marketplace and wanting to be fan friendly. They want sports fans to know if a game is on Fox or a game is on CBS.

SAPPY PARTNERSHIP

The NBA is investigating whether Ballmer (below, left) circumvented the salary cap through an alleged no-show deal for Leonard with Aspiration, which offered carbon offsets and funded tree-planting initiatives.



SCOTT VARLEY/MEDIANEWS GROUP/DAILY BREEZE/GETTY IMAGES



We are developing our app independent of ESPN, but no doubt we're looking at the same market information and we're all responding to what fans are saying loud and clear that there's real confusion in the marketplace. I know firsthand, and I won't pick on any particular sport that's not mine, but I think we've all had that experience where we're ready to watch the game, can't find it and end up going to Google and saying, *Where's Game X on?* Even then, it's not always so clear. Over time I think these new technologies will be very fan friendly, but we're going to have to work through the transition.

SI: The local TV rights are a mess. Regional networks are shutting down. Others are in bankruptcy. Others are, in your words, "teetering." How big a problem is this, and is there a solution?

AS: It is a significant issue for the league right now. It's been a large part of our historic business model, and for our teams, a major revenue source has been the distribution of these games in their local markets, largely through cable and satellite. Many of our regional sports networks only just emerged from bankruptcy and others are now defunct.

I'm not overly concerned, because in the same way several of the major streaming services were saying publicly only a couple of years ago that live sports were unlikely to become part of their model, they're now all embracing it. In the same way that they're embracing sports for national and global distribution, they will discover the value of local distribution as well. By way of example, a local game on average has twice the engagement of a national game, meaning a fan in Milwaukee or in the Bucks' market is likely to watch a Bucks game twice as long as a fan outside of their region. As the marketplace responds to what the viewers and consumers want, there's no doubt that these local games are highly desirable for fans in those markets.

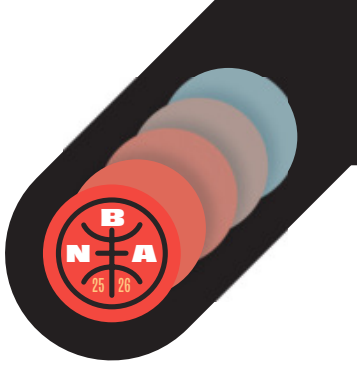
As traditional television continues to decline, and that decline has only accelerated in the last few years, people's default watching becomes streaming services as opposed to traditional television. They're going to want to be able to get these games on those streaming platforms, and the streaming platforms are going to want to differentiate themselves in the marketplace by being the one that carries those local games. Lastly, I think as the marketplace just demonstrated the value of NBA games nationally, by virtue of that example I gave about in terms of engagement, there's absolutely no reason why these games proportionally should have less value locally than they do nationally. If anything, they should be worth more locally.

SI: Could we see an *NFL Sunday Ticket* model? One that includes local games?

AS: Yes, conceptually, it's very much the same thing. To me, the most pro-consumer/fan model would be one where you can get any game at any time regardless of the geography. And you would also simplify the transactional friction in terms of being able to get that game. That's something that, I'd say, many of the national platforms are interested in and those discussions are ongoing.

My hunch is where we will end up is most likely a hybrid. A loosely comparable example would be the

"THE STAKES ARE VERY HIGH HERE," SILVER SAYS OF THE CLIPPERS. "WE WANT TO BE CAREFUL."



newspaper business. If you want to read the print version of the *New York Post*, it's obviously still available. But if the print newspaper's not available, you'll go digitally. And I'm sure there's a different consumer who has little interest in a print newspaper and only wants digital, because they don't like the notion that they're reading old news. They want it current all the time. I think you'll likely see, in the case of our television distribution, some people who like the way it's always been distributed—whether it's broadcast television or cable—and others who will just want to watch games on their tablets or phones or through their televisions, but have it come in through a streaming service as opposed to a legacy way.

SI: I only read print, Adam.

AS: I know. I still smile when I see SI.

SI: Gambling is still a major issue, one that you talk about frequently. Prop bets are an issue. I know you wish NBA games didn't have them. Have you had any discussions with gambling companies about eliminating them?

AS: We have ongoing discussions with the betting companies about prop bets. When sports betting was legalized, the NBA was not at the table, nor were the other sports leagues. These were deals that were cut between states and licensed gaming operators. We then have partners who market the NBA, and we license official data feeds, but that doesn't give us control over how operators, including many who are not licensed by the league, choose to present bets.

And in the case of prop bets, some changes were made as a result of discussions we had, particularly around what we saw as the most high-risk cohort: two-way players who didn't have a lot of stake in the league. We think there are other reasonable modifications that should be made on the range of prop bets that ultimately would be healthy for the industry. So those discussions are ongoing.

SI: You seemed to have pumped the brakes on expansion recently. What once seemed to be a foregone conclusion now feels like it might never happen.

AS: I have not been trying to convey through my words in media availability that we're any less interested in potential expansion than we were two years ago. I'm just being factual. It's a very deliberate process, and it's something that the league, working with our teams, continues to consider and discuss. In fact, we've continued to build out models of both the math on expansion and potential dilution in terms of our current national television deal. What's more difficult is at least attempting to project out to the extent we're selling future shares in the NBA, how to value that. That work continues.

SI: So what about relocation? You have some teams with arena issues. You have teams with leases that are set to expire before the end of the decade.

AS: The answer is yes, we're always looking at everything. We wouldn't be doing our jobs as a league if we weren't always thinking about how we're doing in our existing markets. There is absolutely no intention now to relocate any particular team, but it becomes part of the discussion. I think as we look at arena situations in given markets, we look at the ebb and flow of population in the country and economic prosperity in particular markets. We always want to make sure that we are in markets that can sustain a competitive team. So yes, all those factors are in the mix.

SI: Will your plans to start a European league impact the timeline? Do you want to get that off the ground before you consider expansion or relocation?

AS: No, they are on completely independent tracks, and even different people at the league office who are thinking about the domestic expansion versus what the opportunity is in Europe. I am a big believer that there very well may be an opportunity for a viable NBA-style league in Europe. And that work is continuing. We hired JPMorgan, which is working alongside a boutique investment firm called Raine. That work is ongoing. I had several meetings in Europe this summer with interested stakeholders, but we view that project as completely independent of domestic expansion, and our owners do as well.

SI: Finally, the All-Star Game. Another new format this year, with the U.S. against the world. If this doesn't work, are you ready to take the game behind the barn and shoot it?

AS: I'm not ready to give up.

SI: But what makes you think this latest change is going to work?

AS: I would say, in all seriousness, the changes over the last few years were more incremental. This is a wholesale [change] what we have on the table now. This

FROM TOP: JESSE D. GARRABRANT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; TAYFUN COSKUN/ANADOLU/GETTY IMAGES

STAR WARS

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (top) and Stephen Curry both played in the last three All-Star Games, and each competition had a different format. Yet another iteration is looming for the 2026 game at the Clippers' Intuit Dome in Los Angeles.

Ryder Cup format is a wholesale different approach. I think what's also changing, of course, is the media partner. The game will be back on NBC and will be smack in the middle of the Winter Olympics. I think we will be the beneficiaries of a lead-in of Olympic competition, and then we will be passing back to other Olympic competitions. It's my hope that that will put the players in the mood for this international Ryder Cup-type format.

I also believe that the players recognize what's at stake here, too. There's always been something special about the NBA All-Star Game. There's an entertainment aspect, but of course our fans want to see players playing basketball passionately. I think the players understand that. It's a tradition I believe is worth saving. I know the players association does, too. I'm hoping that the fact that we're back on NBC with John Tesh's music will allow us all to reminisce about the old days of fun All-Star Games and that we'll have a successful one this year.

SI: You do know the definition of insanity, Adam ...

AS: I know. And I know I say this every year. I hope this works. □

TOP

100

See where your favorite stars fall in this preseason ranking of the league's elite talents—and consider the impact of two of the top six players from the Eastern Conference, Jayson Tatum and Tyrese Haliburton, being out with injuries

BY ***Chris Mannix***
AND ***Liam McKeone***

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: ANDREW HANCOCK/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; BILL STREICHER/IMAGN IMAGES; AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES; GREG NELSON; DAVID SHERMAN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; GREG NELSON

ALL STATS FROM 2024–25 NBA SEASON

GARRETT ELLWOOD/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

1

← Nuggets C

NIKOLA JOKIĆ

29.6 PPG • 12.7 RPG • 10.2 APG

Regardless of who holds the MVP hardware, Jokić remains the NBA's top talent. Last season was arguably his best, with career highs in scoring, assists and three-point percentage (41.2%) while becoming just the third player—and first center—to average a triple-double. Last year Denver had a depleted roster and fired its coach and GM in April, but Jokić still dragged the Nuggets to 50 wins, and they nearly beat the Thunder in the conference semifinals.

SCOUT'S TAKE: The ultimate pick-your-poison guy. Do you make him score or make him pass? And he gets his teammates to buy into playing the right way, because they're always going to get the ball.

2

3. **GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO** Bucks PF
30.4 PPG • 11.9 RPG • 6.5 APG

4. **LUKA DONČIĆ** Lakers PG/SG
28.2 PPG • 8.2 RPG • 7.7 APG

Scout's Take

5. **VICTOR WEMBANYAMA** Spurs PF/C *Shooting, footwork, balance, touch—all that's improved. He's a year or two away from being the best player in the game.*
24.3 PPG • 11.0 RPG • 3.8 BPG

6. **ANTHONY EDWARDS** Timberwolves SG
27.6 PPG • 5.7 RPG • 39.5 3FG%

7. **JAYSON TATUM** Celtics SF/PF
26.8 PPG • 8.7 RPG • 6.0 APG

8. **LeBRON JAMES** Lakers G/F
24.4 PPG • 7.8 RPG • 8.2 APG

9. **CADE CUNNINGHAM** Pistons PG/SG
26.1 PPG • 6.1 RPG • 9.1 APG

← Thunder PG/SG

SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER

32.7 PPG • 6.4 APG • 51.9 FG%

The reigning MVP led the league in wins shares with the most since Steph Curry in 2015–16, and he had the lowest turnover percentage of any player with his usage rate or higher in the last 20 years. Free throw merchant? *Pfft.* He gets to the line a ton, but if you were to remove everyone's free throws, SGA would still lead the league in scoring. He's 6'6" with quick feet and a 6'11" wingspan and can defend multiple positions. Oh, and he's 27. He's getting *better.*

SCOUT'S TAKE: He's like what Kawhi Leonard was a few years ago. He's going to take really hard shots, but he's just f---ing good at making them. Shai's as good a tough-shot maker as anyone.

10. **DONOVAN MITCHELL** Cavaliers PG/SG
24.0 PPG • 4.5 RPG • 5.0 APG

11. **STEPHEN CURRY** Warriors PG
24.5 PPG • 6.0 APG • 39.7 3FG%

12. **JALEN BRUNSON** Knicks PG/SG
26.0 PPG • 7.3 APG • 38.3 3FG%

13. **ANTHONY DAVIS** Mavericks PF
24.7 PPG • 11.6 RPG • 2.2 BPG

14. **KAWHI LEONARD** Clippers SF
21.5 PPG • 5.9 RPG • 41.1 3FG%

15. **KEVIN DURANT** Rockets SF/PF
26.6 PPG • 6.0 RPG • 43.0 3FG%

16. **TYRESE HALIBURTON** Pacers PG/SG
18.6 PPG • 9.2 APG • 38.8 3FG%

17. **JOEL EMBIID** 76ers C
23.8 PPG • 8.2 RPG • 4.5 APG

18. **JAYLEN BROWN** Celtics SG/SF
22.2 PPG • 5.8 RPG • 4.5 APG

19

EVAN MOBLEY Cavaliers PF *He's up there with best two-way players. His three-point shooting was big for Cleveland last year. And he looks like he's added some serious strength.*
18.5 PPG • 9.3 RPG • 55.7 FG%

Scout's Take

FROM LEFT: KAITLYN MULCAHY/GETTY IMAGES; GREG NELSON; NIC ANTAYA/GETTY IMAGES

20. **JALEN WILLIAMS** Thunder G/F
21.6 PPG • 5.3 RPG • 5.1 APG

21. **PAOLO BANCHERO** Magic PF
25.9 PPG • 7.5 RPG • 4.8 APG

22 **DEVIN BOOKER** Suns PG/SG
25.6 PPG • 7.1 APG • 33.2 3FG%

23. **JIMMY BUTLER** Warriors G/F
17.5 PPG • 5.4 RPG • 5.4 APG

24. **PASCAL SIAKAM** Pacers PF
20.2 PPG • 6.9 RPG • 51.9 FG%

25. **CHET HOLMGREN** Thunder C/PF
15.0 PPG • 8.0 RPG • 2.2 BPG

26. **KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS** Knicks C/PF
24.4 PPG • 12.8 RPG • 42.0 3FG%

27. **JAMES HARDEN** Clippers PG/SG
22.8 PPG • 5.8 RPG • 8.7 APG

28. **BAM ADEBAYO** Heat C/PF
18.1 PPG • 9.6 RPG • 4.3 APG

29. **KYRIE IRVING** Mavericks PG/SG
24.7 PPG • 4.6 APG • 40.1 3FG

30. **DE'AARON FOX** Spurs PG
23.5 PPG • 6.3 APG • 1.5 SPG

31. **JAMAL MURRAY** Nuggets PG/SG
21.4 PPG • 6.0 APG • 39.3 3FG%

32. **IVICA ZUBAC** Clippers C
16.8 PPG • 12.6 RPG • 62.8 FG%

33. **DAMIAN LILLARD** Trail Blazers PG
24.9 PPG • 7.1 APG • 92.1 FT%

34. **TYRESE MAXEY** 76ers PG/SG
26.3 PPG • 6.1 APG • 1.8 SPG

35. **JAREN JACKSON JR.** Grizzlies C/PF
22.2 PPG • 5.6 RPG • 1.5 BPG

36. **DARIUS GARLAND** Cavaliers PG/SG
20.6 PPG • 6.7 APG • 40.1 3FG%

37. **TRAE YOUNG** Hawks PG
24.2 PPG • 11.6 APG • 34.0 3FG%

38. **ALPEREN ŞENGÜN** Rockets C
19.1 PPG • 10.3 RPG • 4.9 APG

39. **DOMANTAS SABONIS** Kings C/PF
19.1 PPG • 13.9 RPG • 6.0 APG

Scout's Take

40. **ZION WILLIAMSON** Pelicans PF *If he's healthy, he's still really good. You can criticize the beer belly, but very few teams can defend him without sending multiple bodies his way.*
24.6 PPG • 7.2 RPG • 56.7 FG%

41. **AARON GORDON** Nuggets SF/PF
14.7 PPG • 4.8 RPG • 43.6 3FG%

42. **FRANZ WAGNER** Magic SF
24.2 PPG • 5.7 RPG • 4.7 APG

43. **JALEN JOHNSON** Hawks SF/PF
18.9 PPG • 10.0 RPG • 5.0 APG

44. **JA MORANT** Grizzlies PG
23.2 PPG • 4.1 RPG • 7.3 APG

45. **OG ANUNOBY** Knicks SF/PF
18.0 PPG • 4.8 RPG • 1.5 SPG

46 ↓ Celtics PG/SG

DERRICK WHITE

16.4 PPG • 4.8 APG • 38.4 3FG%

For three and a half years he has been a perfect complementary piece in Boston, providing playmaking, defense and timely shotmaking. He is a chameleon, able to do whatever the team needs, dropping 41 one night (as he did against Portland last March) or offering low-volume, high-efficiency scoring (as he did in many other games). With Jayson Tatum out, White's opportunities should increase, and the 2024 Olympian could add All-Star to his list of achievements.

SCOUT'S TAKE: He is a little overrated. But he can make big shots, and he's competitive. Against good players and good teams, he can bring his best, which probably is the most impressive thing about him.

47. **TYLER HERRO** Heat SG
23.9 PPG • 5.5 APG • 37.5 3FG%

48. **AMEN THOMPSON** Rockets SF
14.1 PPG • 8.2 RPG • 1.3 BPG

49. **RUDY GOBERT** Timberwolves C
12.0 PPG • 10.9 RPG • 66.9 FG%

50. **DESMOND BANE** Magic SG
19.2 PPG • 6.1 RPG • 39.2 3FG%

51. **SCOTTIE BARNES** Raptors SG/SF
19.3 PPG • 7.7 RPG • 5.8 APG

52. **JULIUS RANDLE** Timberwolves C/PF
18.7 PPG • 7.1 RPG • 4.7 APG

53. **LaMELO BALL** Hornets PG
25.2 PPG • 4.9 RPG • 7.4 APG

54. **LAURI MARKKANEN** Jazz SF/PF
19.0 PPG • 5.9 RPG • 34.6 3FG%

55 DRAYMOND GREEN

↑ Warriors SF/PF

9.0 PPG • 6.1 RPG • 5.6 APG

The 14-year vet remains one of the NBA's most cerebral, effective defenders. Though his athleticism has fallen off, last year Green was still named to his ninth All-Defensive team and finished third in DPOY voting. It remains remarkable to watch him bark orders from the backline of the defense while ensuring he is still in the right spot to blow up a play. And, even as he continues to decline as a scorer, he remains crucial to the Warriors' offense as a screener and passer.

SCOUT'S TAKE: His defensive IQ is off the charts and on offense his decision making is really strong. As long as Steph Curry is on that team, Draymond is who you want next to him.

FROM LEFT: TROY TADRMINA/IMAGN IMAGES; BRIAN BABINEAU/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; JUSTIN FORD/GETTY IMAGES (2)

56

AUSTIN REAVES Lakers SG *On offense he can play with two ball-dominant guys and do it effectively. He isn't afraid. Defensively, it's interesting. He got opportunities early in his career because he hustled. And now he isn't any good. He's been getting abused. But he's gotten so much better offensively that you live with it.*
20.2 PPG • 5.8 APG • 37.7 3FG%

Scout's Take

57. **ZACH LaVINE** Kings SG/SF
23.3 PPG • 4.2 APG • 44.6 3FG%

58. **BRANDON MILLER** Hornets SF
21.0 PPG • 4.9 RPG • 3.6 APG

59. **PAUL GEORGE** 76ers SF/PF
16.2 PPG • 5.3 RPG • 35.8 3FG%

60. **NORMAN POWELL** Heat SG/SF
21.8 PPG • 3.2 RPG • 41.8 3FG%

61. **PAYTON PRITCHARD** Celtics PG/SG
14.3 PPG • 3.5 APG • 40.7 3FG%

63. **ALEX CARUSO** Thunder PG/SG
7.1 PPG • 1.6 SPG • 35.3 3FG%

64. **RJ BARRETT** Raptors SG/SF
21.1 PPG • 6.3 RPG • 5.4 APG

65. **DeMAR DeROZAN** Kings SG/SF
22.2 PPG • 4.4 APG • 47.7 FG%

Scout's Take

DYSON DANIELS Hawks PG/SG *When you're a steals guy to his level on and off the basketball, you're pretty good. Offensively, he's shown improvement with his shot and his decision making.*
14.1 PPG • 5.9 RPG • 3.0 SPG

66 LU DORT

→ Thunder SG/SF

10.1 PPG • 4.1 RPG • 41.2 3FG%

Dort is a middle linebacker in an NBA jersey, a sturdy, physical—sometimes too physical—defender who has drawn comparisons to Metta World Peace. He is arguably the crowning achievement of Oklahoma City's player development machine, rising from undrafted free agent to All-Defensive first team and starting wing on an NBA champion. His offensive bag isn't especially deep, but over the last two seasons Dort has evolved into a reliable three-point shooter.

SCOUT'S TAKE: He's physical to the point of being dirty—I mean that as a compliment. He will try every trick in the book. He's gotten better with his shot, and in that OKC offense, that's all he needs.

67. **MIKAL BRIDGES** Knicks SG/SF
17.6 PPG • 3.7 APG • 50.0 FG%

68. **JARRETT ALLEN** Cavaliers C
13.5 PPG • 9.7 RPG • 70.6 FG%

69. **DENI AVDIJA** Trail Blazers SF
16.9 PPG • 7.3 RPG • 3.9 APG

70. **KLAY THOMPSON** Mavericks SG/SF
14.0 PPG • 41.2 FG% • 39.1 3FG%

71. **NAZ REID** Timberwolves PF/C
14.2 PPG • 6.0 RPG • 37.9 3FG%

72. **JOSH GIDDEY** Bulls PG/SF
14.6 PPG • 8.1 RPG • 7.2 APG

73. **CAMERON JOHNSON** Nuggets PF
18.8 PPG • 39.0 3FG% • 89.3 FT%

74. **COBY WHITE** Bulls PG/SG
20.4 PPG • 4.5 APG • 37.0 3FG%

5 BEST COACHES

BY **Chris Mannix**

1. Rick Carlisle
PACERS

In 2011, he guided the Mavericks to a title behind Dirk Nowitzki's half-court game. Last season Indy and its free-flowing offense came within one win of a second championship for Carlisle. That's adaptability.

2. Erik Spoelstra
HEAT

Spo's Heat have had top 10 defenses in 13 of his 17 seasons—and in two others they finished 11th. He is widely admired for his creativity and play-calling in big moments. No coach squeezes more out of less.

3. Mark Daigneault
THUNDER

Daigneault has two coveted skills: player development (see OKC's early years) and game management (see its later ones). No wonder he has a title and complete buy-in from a roster loaded with young talent.

4. Tyronn Lue
CLIPPERS

The superstar whisperer has forged fruitful partnerships with LeBron James and Kyrie Irving in Cleveland and Kawhi Leonard and James Harden in L.A. And Lue has shown a knack for coaching through adversity.

5. Ime Udoka
ROCKETS

After steering Boston to the 2022 Finals, Udoka generated a 19-win improvement and then a 52-win season in his first two years in Houston. Players love his blunt, no-nonsense approach.

FROM LEFT: ADAM HAGY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; JOSHUA GATELEY/GETTY IMAGES; TIM WARNER/GETTY IMAGES

75. **CHRISTIAN BRAUN** Nuggets SG
15.4 PPG • 5.2 RPG • 39.7 3FG%

76. **MYLES TURNER** Bucks C
15.6 PPG • 6.5 RPG • 39.6 3FG%

77. **JADEN McDANIELS** Timberwolves SF/PF
12.2 PPG • 5.7 RPG • 1.3 SPG

78. **ISAIAH HARTENSTEIN** Thunder PF/C
11.2 PPG • 10.7 RPG • 3.8 APG

79. **KRISTAPS PORZIŅĢIS** Hawks PF/C
19.5 PPG • 6.8 RPG • 41.2 3FG%

80. **JRUE HOLIDAY** Trail Blazers PG
11.1 PPG • 3.9 APG • 35.3 3FG%

81. **MICHAEL PORTER JR.** Nets SF
18.2 PPG • 7.0 RPG • 39.5 3FG%

82. **DONTE DiVINCENZO** Timberwolves SG
11.7 PPG • 3.6 APG • 39.7 3FG%

83. **BRANDON INGRAM** Raptors SF/PF
22.2 PPG • 5.6 RPG • 5.2 APG

84. **BRANDIN PODZIEMSKI** Warriors SG
11.7 PPG • 5.1 RPG • 37.2 3FG%

85. **FRED VANVLEET** Rockets PG/SG
14.1 PPG • 5.6 APG • 1.6 SPG

86. **JOSH HART** Knicks SG/SF
13.6 PPG • 9.6 RPG • 5.9 APG

87. **DE'ANDRE HUNTER** Cavaliers SF
17.0 PPG • 4.0 RPG • 40.5 3FG%

88. **AUSAR THOMPSON** Pistons SF
10.1 PPG • 5.1 RPG • 1.7 SPG

89. **TREY MURPHY III** Pelicans SG/SF
21.2 PPG • 5.1 RPG • 36.1 3FG%

90. **CJ McCOLLUM** Wizards PG/SG
21.1 PPG • 4.1 APG • 37.3 3FG%

91. **DEVIN VASSELL** Spurs SG/SF
16.3 PPG • 4.0 RPG • 36.8 3FG%

92. **AARON NESMITH** Pacers SF
12.0 PPG • 4.0 RPG • 43.1 3FG%

93. **ANDREW NEMBHARD** Pacers PG/SG
10.0 PPG • 5.0 APG • 1.2 SPG

5 ROOKIES TO WATCH

BY Kevin Sweeney

1. COOPER FLAGG

Mavericks G/F

He could be a franchise player in time. But this season the No. 1 pick's defensive skills, intensity and feel for the game should make him the rookie with the greatest impact on his team.

2. DYLAN HARPER

Spurs PG

Point guards with Harper's size (6' 6") and three-level scoring ability are rare. The idea of a Harper-Wembanyama partnership is compelling—and frightening.

3. TRE JOHNSON

Wizards SG

He slipped to No. 6 in the draft, but a star may have fallen into Washington's lap. The shooting guard has a complete offensive game and shot the cover off the ball in his lone year at Texas.

4. VJ EDGECOMBE

76ers SG/SF

The Baylor guard should be one of the league's most exciting rookies because of his highlight-reel athleticism. Expect Edgecombe to play a key role early in Philadelphia.

5. KON KNUEPPEL

Hornets SG/SF

The elite shooting (40.6 from three at Duke) is the first thing you notice, but the 6' 7" wing will impact the game in other ways for the Hornets, thanks to his basketball IQ and playmaking chops.

FROM LEFT: RYAN STETZ/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ALLEN BEREZOVSKY/GETTY IMAGES; ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES; LOGAN RIELY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; GARRETT ELLWOOD/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

STEPHEN LEW/IMAGN IMAGES

94. **DILLON BROOKS** Suns SG/SF
14.0 PPG • 3.7 RPG • 39.7 3FG%

95. **DERECK LIVELY II** Mavericks C
8.7 PPG • 7.5 RPG • 70.2 FG%

96. **IMMANUEL QUICKLEY** Raptors PG/SG
17.1 PPG • 5.8 APG • 37.8 3FG%

97. **NIKOLA VUČEVIĆ** Bulls C
18.5 PPG • 10.1 RPG • 40.2 3FG%

98. **HERB JONES** Pelicans SF/PF
10.3 PPG • 3.9 RPG • 1.9 SPG

99. **BRADLEY BEAL** Clippers SG
17.0 PPG • 3.7 APG • 38.6 3FG%

100

↑ Spurs PG

STEPHON CASTLE

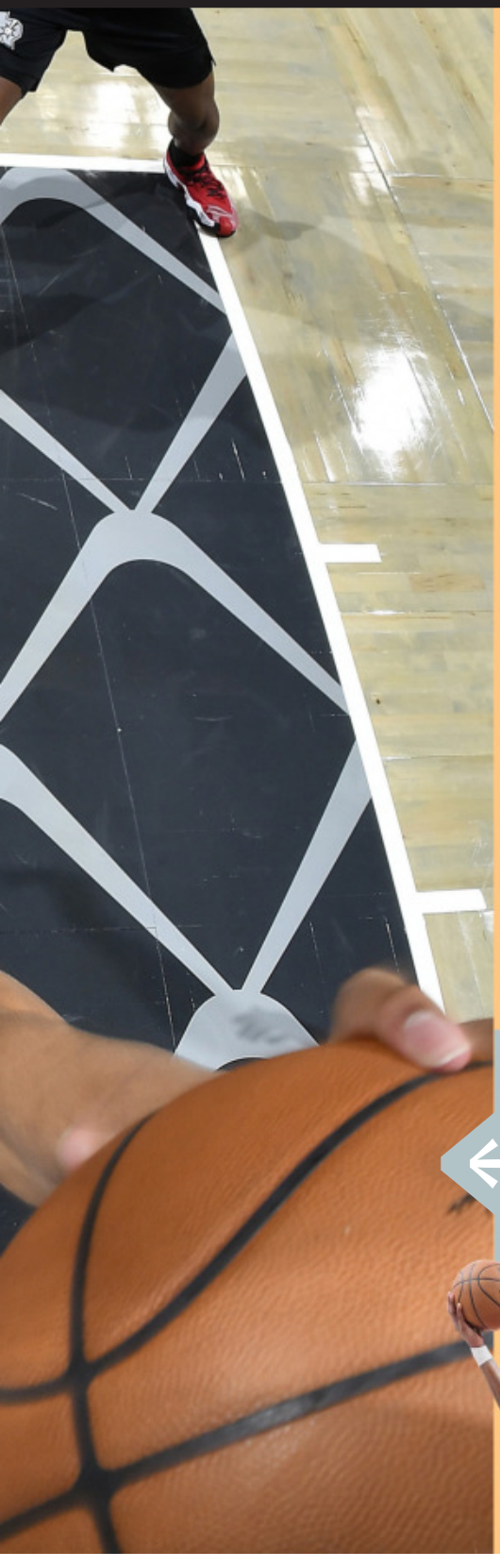
14.7 PPG • 3.7 RPG • 4.1 APG

At the end of last season, with De'Aaron Fox and Victor Wembanyama out, Castle started 18 games and averaged 18.1 points and 6.2 assists. This year the Spurs' backcourt is suddenly crowded with No. 2 pick Dylan Harper in town, but Castle's combination of skill and defensive versatility will keep the 2024–25 Rookie of the Year on the floor. Expect a strong sophomore season.

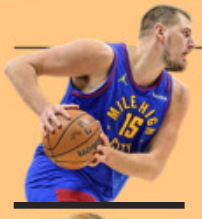
SCOUT'S TAKE: He's better than I thought. His shooting improved throughout the season. His decision making is impressive, and I do think he can be a really impactful on-ball defender.

Will the Thunder make it back to the Finals?
Which team will rise in the East?
Who will be this year's MVP? Does next year's draft have any players worth tanking for?

TIP-INS



BY **Chris Mannix**



MVP › Nikola Jokić Nuggets

It took a superlative year for Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (and the Thunder) to wrestle the MVP from Jokić last season. He'll be back on top after Denver executed a badly needed roster reload.

Runners-up > Luka Dončić, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander

ROOKIE of the YEAR › Cooper Flagg Mavericks

The most hyped U.S. prospect since LeBron James will live up to expectations. Defense will be Flagg's forte early, and he won't be asked to carry the Mavs right away. But before long he will prove that he can.

Runners-up > Derik Queen, Ace Bailey

COACH of the YEAR › Jamahl Mosley Magic

His team is primed for success. Desmond Bane, acquired from Memphis, will bolster an anemic offense and fit seamlessly into a defense that was second in efficiency in each of the last two seasons.

Runners-up > Quin Snyder, Mitch Johnson

SIXTH MAN of the YEAR › Naz Reid Timberwolves

Reid, the '23-24 winner of this award, played a career-high 27.5 minutes per game last year. Expect that number to increase for the durable big with Rudy Gobert showing signs of decline.

Runners-up > Nickeil Alexander-Walker, Alex Caruso

DEFENSIVE PLAYER of the YEAR > Victor Wembanyama Spurs

Engrave Wembanyama's name on this award for the next decade. The NBA's leader in blocks the last two years, Wemby was on track to claim his first DPOY award in 2024-25 before an injury cut his season short.

Runners-up > Evan Mobley, Chet Holmgren

MOST IMPROVED PLAYER › Amen Thompson Rockets

Pick a Thompson, any Thompson. Amen edges kid brother (by one minute) Ausar thanks to a bigger role following the exit of Jalen Green and Dillon Brooks in Houston. This is the year Amen becomes a star.

Runners-up > Ausar Thompson, Andrew Nembhard

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: FERNANDO MEDINA/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; DUSTIN BRADFORD/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID DOW/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; JULIO AGUILAR/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID BERDING/GETTY IMAGES; GREG NELSON

Eastern Conference

THE BEST OF A BAD BUNCH

YOU HAVE to make Cleveland the prohibitive favorites, just because the East is so bad. The Cavs are so good defensively. Evan Mobley took a big step last season, and he's only going to get better. Lonzo Ball is a great pickup for them. He's a real point guard. He can defend and he can shoot. He's never been healthy, but when he plays, he's really good.

The Magic overpaid for Desmond Bane, no question. But he's a good addition because their three top guys—Paolo Banchero, Franz Wagner and Jalen Suggs—aren't great shooters. Bane gives them exactly what they were lacking. He's also a guy they can run pick-and-roll for. And he doesn't hurt them on defense, which is Orlando's strength.

Seriously, the Knicks' offseason additions are meaningless. Jordan Clarkson has been on the decline. Guerschon Yabusele is overrated—he put up decent numbers last season on a terrible Sixers team. Mike Brown is a good coach but he has a history of wearing on teams. For all the grief Tom Thibodeau got for grinding guys down, Mike does the same thing. I don't think New York will be as good as it was last year.

Is Joel Embiid healthy? That's the only question with the Sixers. Tyrese Maxey is good, but I feel like he's thrived on being a second or third option. Without Embiid on the floor, it's harder for Maxey to get downhill. Paul George doesn't really scare me anymore because I just feel like he's cooked. But if Embiid is healthy, he can carry Philadelphia.

In Atlanta, Kristaps Porziņģis is a massive question. Which version are you going to get? How much is he going to play? He can make a difference, especially defensively, when he's out there. Porziņģis is not really a lob threat but you can play pick-and-pop with him. Nickeil Alexander-Walker was a good pickup. Zaccharie Risacher should keep improving. Jalen Johnson is a beast offensively. It all looks good. There's pressure on Trae Young to glue it all together.

This is the worst roster the Bucks have had in their post-title years. Myles Turner will give them more than Brook Lopez did last year, and Kyle Kuzma will be better in a full season. But this is a guard-dominant league and you're not winning anything with Kevin Porter Jr. and Gary Trent Jr. as your backcourt.

The Pistons are a real threat. Cade Cunningham's a f---ing stud. He's one of my favorite players in the league. Duncan Robinson taking over Malik Beasley's role shouldn't be that much of a drop-off. Jalen Duren and Jaden Ivey play hard and have a little bit of skill, but bring more to the table because of their athleticism and their effort. Putting those guys beside Cunningham *(right)* with some shooting is pretty tough. I expect them to make a little bit of a jump.

HOW THEY'LL FINISH

With Tyrese Haliburton out and Myles Turner gone, last year's conference champs sink in the standings

1		CLEVELAND **CAVALIERS** OVER / UNDER /// 56.5 WINS
2		ORLANDO **MAGIC** OVER / UNDER /// 50.5 WINS
3		NEW YORK **KNICKS** OVER / UNDER /// 52.5 WINS

4 PHILADELPHIA **76ERS**
OVER / UNDER /// **42.5 WINS**

5 ATLANTA **HAWKS**
OVER / UNDER /// **47.5 WINS**

6 MILWAUKEE **BUCKS**
OVER / UNDER /// 42.5 WINS

7 DETROIT **PISTONS**
OVER / UNDER /// **46.5 WINS**

8 MIAMI **HEAT**
OVER / UNDER /// **37.5 WINS**

9 BOSTON **CELTICS**
OVER / UNDER /// **41.5 WINS**

10 CHICAGO **BULLS**
OVER / UNDER /// **32.5 WINS**

11 TORONTO **RAPTORS**
OVER / UNDER /// **39.5 WINS**

12 CHARLOTTE **HORNETS**
OVER / UNDER /// **26.5 WINS**

13 INDIANA **PACERS**
OVER / UNDER /// **37.5 WINS**

14 BROOKLYN **NETS**
OVER / UNDER /// **20.5 WINS**

15 WASHINGTON **WIZARDS**
OVER / UNDER /// **21.5 WINS**

OVER/UNDER LINES FROM FANDUEL

NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

I'm a big Norman Powell fan. He can score in multiple ways, and that's something Miami needs. That was what they were looking for Terry Rozier to do when they got him. He can do that a little but not to the level of Norm. So if nothing else, he's an upgrade over Terry. He's not replacing Jimmy Butler's intangibles in terms of the winning plays and defense and toughness. Not that Norm isn't tough, I just think he's a hired scorer, and he'll do that pretty well in the East.

The Celtics still have pretty good parts. Jaylen Brown is a great athlete, he's going to be able to score. With Jayson Tatum out, Derrick White will excel in a bigger role. Payton Pritchard is going to explode this year, and they still have Sam Hauser, so they have as much shooting as anybody. I think they're going to struggle with their frontcourt, but in the East, I don't really see many players who will create a whole lot of problems for them. Someone like Banchero, maybe, but Jaylen can guard up. The Celtics will be better than people are expecting, especially with the other injuries around the conference. □

Western Conference

WHICH STARS WILL RISE?

CHET HOLMGREN gives the champion Thunder a chance to really improve. I think he's got another step he can take and if he does, that's going to be a big problem. Right now he's an O.K. shooter and he can get some stuff done with the ball, but he's not great at it. With some strength he can take the smaller guys on him and just beat 'em up.

The Nuggets made some smart moves this offseason. Bruce Brown was good for them in 2023, and he's the kind of player who plays better on good teams. For Denver, it's going to come down to who can be their third scorer in the playoffs. Michael Porter Jr. is a bit of a wack job but he could get a bucket. Can Cam Johnson? To me he's a fifth starter, fourth starter, first-guy-off-the-bench kind of guy.

Kevin Durant gives the Rockets a real scorer for the postseason. But they're an overinflated team. Dillon Brooks was really good for them and without him, they lose a little bit of their identity. Maybe Tari Eason can be that kind of guy. I think they're going to be a top four or five team but it seems like a little bit of a stretch to say, "Oh my God, they're going to be *the* team because they got Durant."

Luka Dončić is going to have a chip on his shoulder all season for the Lakers. LeBron James is still good enough to be a solid No. 2, but I wonder how motivated he is after that weird offseason of trade rumors. I like the addition of Deandre Ayton, especially given they had no options and they were able to come up with him.

Golden State can do what they did in the second half of last season for stretches, but I don't think they can sustain it for a full year. With their age, guys will miss time. Jimmy Butler *(right)* on his best behavior fits with anybody. It's once he starts changing his behavior that doesn't fit with anybody.

Minnesota is a little bit worse than last season because Mike Conley's a year older and they lost Nickeil Alexander-Walker. Terrence Shannon Jr. could be Alexander-Walker in a year or two, but he's not now. Rudy Gobert takes a step back every year. Julius Randle is a wild card. He'll have to be an All-Star for them to finish higher than they did last season.

Dallas will be slow offensively. That's going to be a problem until Kyrie Irving comes back. Cooper Flagg is going to be really good in the way that Kevin Garnett was really good. His MVP season will be 24 and 12 with six assists. Right now he's 18 and physically weak and not really good at dribbling with his left hand or shooting. So it's going to take him a minute, but once he gets it, he's going to be really good.

The Clippers are the highest variance team going into this year. If you told me that they finished below .500, I'd be like, *Yeah, I could see it—every old guy got*

HOW THEY'LL FINISH

Even the play-ins look juicy, with Victor Wembanyama getting his first chance to compete beyond Game 82

1 OKLAHOMA CITY **THUNDER**
OVER / UNDER /// 62.5 WINS

2 DENVER **NUGGETS**
OVER / UNDER /// 54.5 WINS

3 HOUSTON **ROCKETS**
OVER / UNDER /// 52.5 WINS

4 LOS ANGELES **LAKERS**
OVER / UNDER /// 49.5 WINS

5 GOLDEN STATE **WARRIORS**
OVER / UNDER /// 45.5 WINS

6 MINNESOTA **TIMBERWOLVES**
OVER / UNDER /// 49.5 WINS

7 DALLAS **MAVERICKS**
OVER / UNDER /// 41.5 WINS

8 LOS ANGELES **CLIPPERS**
OVER / UNDER /// 47.5 WINS

9 SAN ANTONIO **SPURS**
OVER / UNDER /// 45.5 WINS

10 MEMPHIS **GRIZZLIES**
OVER / UNDER /// 40.5 WINS

11 NEW ORLEANS **PELICANS**
OVER / UNDER /// 30.5 WINS

12 SACRAMENTO **KINGS**
OVER / UNDER /// 34.5 WINS

13 PORTLAND **TRAIL BLAZERS**
OVER / UNDER /// 34.5 WINS

14 PHOENIX **SUNS**
OVER / UNDER /// 32.5 WINS

15 UTAH **JAZZ**
OVER / UNDER /// 18.5 WINS

OVER/UNDER LINES FROM FANDUEL

LOGAN RIELY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

hurt and they started to hate each other. And if you told me that they were really good I'd be like, *Yeah, they got a bunch of veteran guys who know how to play.* They just have so much going on. James Harden is his own entity. You have Kawhi Leonard's off-the-court problem plus hiss normal problems. They added Chris Paul to the mix. And you bring in Bradley Beal, who sulked all of last season in Phoenix.

I still think the Spurs are a year or two away. The media is higher on the rate of Victor Wembanyama's progression than the league is. De'Aaron Fox should help accelerate the process. I guess he's a good fit with them, but they already have Stephon Castle and now Dylan Harper. If Harper's going to be their guy, maybe Fox slows that process down a little bit, too.

Ja Morant doesn't have the juice that he once had. Some of that's probably physical, some of it's probably mental. Before, the way he conducted himself galvanized the Grizzlies. He was one of those guys that everybody wants to play for and play with. And I didn't see that when he came back last year. □

BY *Chris Mannix*

WHO IS GOING TO WIN IT ALL?

EASTERN CONFERENCE FINALS
CAVALIERS *over* **MAGIC** *in 7*

Cleveland's commitment to continuity pays off while upstart Orlando rides a physical defense along with improved perimeter shooting to the conference finals. But after two years of stalling out in the second round, the Cavaliers keep on climbing.

WESTERN CONFERENCE FINALS
NUGGETS *over* **THUNDER** *in 7*

These titans of the West beat back a deep field of contenders to set up a mouthwatering matchup between two recent champs and the last two MVP winners. Last season OKC eliminated Denver in the conference semifinals. Now the Nuggets return the favor.

NBA FINALS

NUGGETS *over* **CAVS** *in 6*

Denver has too much postseason experience—and too much Jokić—for Cleveland to handle. Could a grueling conference playoffs weaken the Nuggets? Perhaps, but that will be the only thing that can keep Denver from a second title in four seasons.

UP FOR GRABS

Donovan Mitchell (45) and Julian Strawther, going at it last season, may meet again with a title on the line in 2026.

ISAIAH J. DOWNING/IMAGN IMAGES

GAMES TO WATCH

BY *Liam McKeone*

OCT. 21 /// 7:30 PM ET
ROCKETS at **THUNDER**

➔ In the first game of the season, Kevin Durant begins a new chapter in Houston by watching OKC players receive their championship rings—something he had hoped to do in his Thunder years but didn't.

OCT. 22 /// 9:30 PM ET
SPURS at **MAVERICKS**

➔ Cooper Flagg, the No. 1 pick, leads the Mavs against No. 2 selection Dylan Harper and Victor Wembanyama, who returns to action after his season was cut short last year due to deep vein thrombosis.

NOV. 3 /// 7 PM ET
BUCKS at **PACERS**

➔ Myles Turner's first game back in Indiana after spending 10 seasons with the Pacers will be emotional, especially after he signed a long-term deal with the division rival in July.

NOV. 26 /// 10 PM ET
ROCKETS at **WARRIORS**

➔ Their first-round playoff series last season was an absolute rock fight that went seven games. It will be even spicier with Houston's addition of Durant, who was a two-time Finals MVP with Golden State.

JAN. 19 /// 2:30 PM ET
THUNDER at **CAVALIERS**

➔ These teams were the No. 1 seeds in last season's playoffs, but OKC won the NBA title while Cleveland was bounced in the conference semifinals. A budding dynasty visits a squad out for redemption.

ERICK W. RASCO

1

Darryn Peterson

KANSAS

Bill Self calls the 6'6" Peterson the best freshman he has recruited at Kansas. The top American guard prospect since Cade Cunningham should be among the nation's top scorers this season.

2

AJ Dybantsa

BYU

The 6'8" Dybantsa is the kind of big scoring wing every NBA team wants. At 18, he already has advanced offensive skills and he'll fine-tune them under Cougars coach Kevin Young.

3

Cameron Boozer

DUKE

The 6'9" son of former Duke great Carlos may not have quite as high a ceiling as Peterson or Dybantsa, but he'll be a double-double machine for the Blue Devils, and likely in the NBA, too.

4

Nate Ament

TENNESSEE

The 6'9" forward was a late bloomer who jumped up boards over the past year and a half. He still needs to put on weight, but long, agile wings with his shotmaking ability are hard to find.

5

Mikel Brown Jr.

LOUISVILLE

The 6'3" point guard's stock rose with his play for Team USA at the FIBA U-19 World Cup this summer. The electric shooter and playmaker should be terrific in coach Pat Kelsey's offense.

NBA DRAFT PREVIEW

These prospects will be topping teams' big boards next June

BY **Kevin Sweeney**

6 Jayden Quaintance

KENTUCKY

The transfer power forward, 18, has game-changing defensive potential because of his length and shot blocking. He's coming off an ACL tear late last season at Arizona State.

7 Karim López

NZ BREAKERS

The 6'9" López is a Mexican-born forward now moving the needle in the Australian NBL. He's impressed with his defensive mobility and his improved three-point shooting.

8 Tounde Yessoufou

BAYLOR

Scouts love the 6'5" guard's upside on the defensive end and his scoring ability. The California boys' all-time preps scoring leader will look to be Baylor's seventh first-round pick since 2021.

9 Caleb Wilson

NORTH CAROLINA

The 6'9" forward teamed up with Boozer in AAU and will now be his college rival at UNC. Wilson's athleticism is elite; if he can make threes consistently, he will climb draft boards.

10 Bennett Stirtz

IOWA

The 6'4" senior guard's rise from Division II recruit to NBA prospect has been remarkable. He dominated at Drake last season and now follows coach Ben McCollum to the Big Ten.

25
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26
FACE THE FACTS
SCOTT WINTERS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

BASKETBALL PREVIEW

NOVEMBER 2025 • SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

After a Final Four appearance last year, Houston will be tough to beat (sound familiar, NBA fans?). But the reigning champs will have a say about that, while on the women's side, an elite program went out and nabbed the country's top scorer. College season is upon us, and the madness will start well before March

TEXAS TOAST

Teams that go up against Joseph Tugler and the Cougars will struggle to score against a defense that was the nation's stingiest last year.

BASKETBALL PREVIEW

NOVEMBER 2025
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

BACK with BIG

Barely 48 hours after celebrating a national title, the Gators were back at work, navigating NIL deals, NBA draft decisions and transfer portal targets. Hungry for more, Florida is already chasing another run at glory

Clockwise from bottom left: Boogie Fland, Thomas Haugh, Rueben Chinyelu, Alex Condon and Xaivian Lee

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ***Erick W. Rasco***

BY ***Kevin Sweeney***

GER BITE

Walk into the Florida basketball complex and the first thing you'll see is a trophy case. Inside it is a shrine to the Gators' history, most prominently the program's back-to-back national titles in 2006 and '07. Both the official NCAA trophies and the more visually appealing clear-glass basketball presented by the NABC reside there, as well as nets from those tournament runs.

That beautifully manicured collection of championship memorabilia lives in stark contrast to the coaching staff's offices, where many of the program's 2025 title relics currently reside, a small reminder of reaching the apex of the college hoops world.

But finding the wooden NCAA championship trophy that head coach Todd Golden hoisted jubilantly in San Antonio now sitting unassumingly on the corner of executive assistant Tracy Pfaff's desk? That feels out of place.

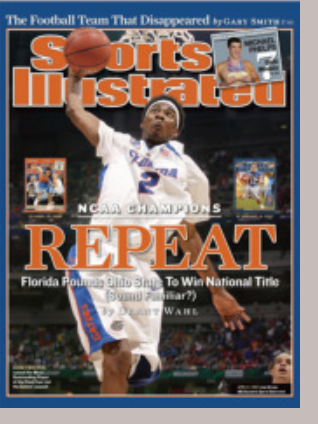
That temporary home for college basketball's biggest prize serves as a good reminder of just how fleeting winning a national title is in today's landscape. The final buzzer sounded at 10:09 p.m. CT on April 7. The team partied well into the night, then got on a plane back to Gainesville, Fla., the next day ... and that was that.

By Wednesday, fewer than 40 hours since confetti fell, Golden and his staff held meetings with potential returning players trying to lock in contracts for 2025–26. The

GREG NELSON

CHOMP-IONS

The Gators won back-to-back titles in 2006 and '07 and want to build on April's championship with Condon (left, with ball), who chose to return for his junior season.



FROM LEFT: JOHN BIEVER; JOHN W. MCDONOUGH; GREG NELSON

team was honored at the football team's spring game that Saturday and hosted a key transfer portal recruit early the next week. Then, the entire starting five left Gainesville for offseason workouts with NBA draft decisions looming.

"You wake up on Tuesday morning and you've won the national championship and you just get back on the bus. You come home and watch TV that night and you're like, 'All right, well, gotta try to do that s--- again,' you know?" Golden says.

The chase started with the Gators playing catch-up. The transfer portal had been open for 15 days when Florida won the title. The market for top players was spiking because of fears that the imminent approval of the *House v. NCAA* settlement could reset the market, putting restrictions on outside NIL deals in the new revenue-sharing era that also capped the amount each school could pay its players. Golden told his staff to eschew recruiting the portal while the team was still playing. He didn't want his

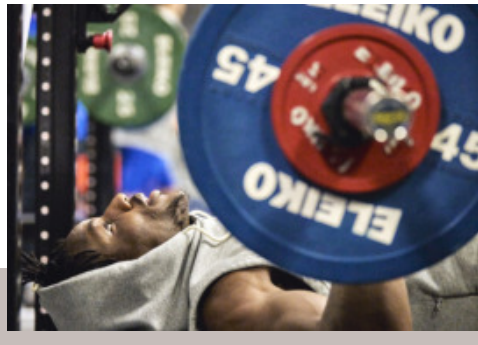
current players to think the staff was distracted from the task at hand. The lone exception was Princeton point guard Xaivian Lee, a high school teammate of forward Thomas Haugh. Golden called Lee in the week leading up to the Final Four to express formal interest. Even the work the Gators did prior to the tournament on negotiating with potential returnees Haugh and Alex Condon had to be ripped up, both because of the market's explosion and those players' value having increased in the March run. No player is completely unmovable in 2025, and Florida had to be able to offer close to market value to avoid any chance of its stars getting wandering eyes.

"This is a production-based business, and where we were on March 9 was a lot different than where we were on April 7," Golden says.

It quickly became apparent the $5 million to $6 million the Gators budgeted for the 2025–26 roster in early March wouldn't go nearly as far as they thought. Golden had plenty of tough conversations with athletic director Scott Stricklin

WEIGHTING GAME

Condon, Chinyelu and Haugh (from top) returned to the fold, while Lee (bottom) and Fland (opposite) were big transfer portal pickups.



FLORIDA NEEDED TO DOUBLE ITS BUDGET TO NORTH OF $10 MILLION IN ORDER TO PUT TOGETHER A ROSTER CAPABLE OF ANOTHER TITLE RUN.

and the program's top donors to pool together the cash necessary to keep Condon, Haugh, 6' 10" center Rueben Chinyelu and 7' 1" big man Micah Handlogten and lure top portal targets like Lee. Guard Denzel Aberdeen, a Florida native, surprisingly hitting the portal and landing a payday north of $2 million from Kentucky only added to the urgency. While it may have been slightly easier to have those conversations fresh off a championship, the shortfall was steep: Florida needed more than $10 million to build another title-caliber roster.

"If we want to make sure we're in position to possibly get back to making a deep run in this tournament, this is what was out there. This is what our guys could have gotten," Golden says of those donor conversations. "I think everybody [in college basketball] had that, 'Wow, this is out of control' or, 'This is a lot more than last year' conversations among their staffs, their donors, the people supporting their program."

Lee, a supremely talented scorer, committed on his visit after being wowed by the Gators' in-depth plan to take his game to the next level while competing in the tough SEC. Eight days later, Haugh confirmed he was returning despite initially putting his name in the NBA draft pool. "I knew I wanted to be back in school, and I didn't want to not give my whole 100% to the predraft process," Haugh says. Florida sold Haugh on the chance to play more on the wing as a junior, with a starting spot open at the three instead of his role the previous year as a super sub at the four. It could help boost Haugh's draft stock and let the Gators get all their best players on the floor at the same time. If all went according to plan, Haugh could convince Condon to return at his usual power forward slot and the Gators could retain arguably the best frontcourt in the country.

Condon, the best draft prospect of the potential returners, says going into the NBA combine in May, he was actually 60-40 to stay in the draft. (Haugh, his best friend, isn't so sure. "I knew he was coming back from the beginning," Haugh says with a laugh.) Projected as a late first-round or early second-round selection, Condon was closely watching how Golden and the Gators' staff rebuilt the roster. If he was going to spurn the guaranteed contract for a pick in the No. 30 to 40 range, he wanted a real chance to repeat.

"The pickups they got in the portal were pretty important [to me]," Condon says. "Just to make sure we're going to be a title-contending team again."

As the Gators waited on Condon and Chinyelu, who received a G League Elite Camp invite, to make their stay-or-go decisions, they were busy working on landing the missing piece: a dynamic ballhandler to pair with Lee in the backcourt. The target was Arkansas guard Boogie Fland, who put his name into the portal on the last day possible to keep options open but seemed more likely to stay in the draft. A midseason hand injury derailed a promising start for the former five-star prospect, making his NBA stock a bit murky. Fland called it "very humbling" to consider a second year of college after long projecting as a one-and-done, but says he knew he had "more potential to tap into." And the burgeoning NIL market where Fland is reportedly making millions made it a much easier financial decision to consider staying in school.

He was officially sold on a college return after his first

GOLDEN GATORS

Florida's coach (below) promises to elevate his players' pro prospects while also keeping an eye firmly on the tournament with reminders of past success in the Gators' practice facility.

Condon saw a similar chance to jump up boards with another season in Gainesville. He says 2025–26 will definitely be his last year in college after coming so close to making the jump this summer. He'll get to show off the strides he has made as a shooter and decision-maker that can translate to the next level. "I feel like I'm a different player this year," Condon says.

It's an offseason that couldn't have been scripted much better.

So brings the Gators to their next challenge: sharpening this group into a championship-caliber team.

conversation with Golden, who laid out how they could help Fland rebuild his stock by improving as a finisher around the rim and adding muscle. A year ago, Walter Clayton Jr. came back to Florida after having been on the fringes of the 2024 draft, elevated his game, set the Gators' single-season scoring record and became a first-round pick in June. Alijah Martin transferred in from Florida Atlantic for the '24–25 season, had the best year of his career and was drafted No. 39 by the Raptors. The pitch was enough to convince Fland to withdraw from the draft midway through the combine and, shortly thereafter, he picked the Gators.

GOLDEN KNOWS they have the pieces, at one point during a practice huddle reminding the team they have "elite talent." What needs to follow: Being "f---ing elite in our preparation and elite in our execution." During a drill, he barks that if any player makes the same defensive mistake they just witnessed in practice during a game, they can head to the sideline without waiting for Golden to sub them out.

Last season Florida played primarily three-guard lineups with 6'4" sharpshooter Will Richard at the three. Now it will be Haugh, a physical 6'9" forward who made fewer

than one shot from beyond the arc per game in 2024–25. The Pennsylvania native looks leaner and more mobile, and offensively has quieted down his shooting mechanics and improved his handle.

"My first year I was here and last year, I didn't really have the skills to be on the wing, I'll be honest," Haugh says. "I didn't feel comfortable dribbling the ball, didn't feel comfortable enough in my shot. But this summer, I think I took a big leap ... I feel confident to be in that spot."

Between Haugh's improvement from the perimeter and Condon rebuilding his jump shot during the predraft process, Florida's staff is confident they'll still space the floor as well as last season. Lee brings some of the same off-the-dribble three-point prowess that Clayton did, while Fland, who has added 17 pounds of muscle since his arrival, is also dynamic at three levels.

The biggest challenge is the much-discussed "hunted" label. For as good as Florida was last season, it wasn't until March that it was taken seriously as a title contender.

"People were like, 'Oh, they're good, but are they really that good?' " Golden says. "And then we won the SEC tournament and people were like, 'Oh f---, they're going to win the national championship.' And we really had to adjust to that."

You'd be hard-pressed to find a preseason Top 25 without the Gators in the top five (they rank No. 3 in SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's projections). The players say the drive is even stronger now that they've tasted success, and Golden has seen that manifest in their approach.

"They're not running from the challenge," Golden says. "These guys have all come back and I feel like they've worked even harder than they did last year. They're not showing any signs of being content."

Before a September practice, players and coaches alike bounce around the gym, energy exploding from the huddle, the weight of the impending chase to repeat nowhere to be found. The moment of pure joy and togetherness then quickly shifts to intense focus as Golden gets into the lesson plan for the day.

"My first year I was here, you'd see a couple of people in the gym," Haugh says. "Last year you saw everybody in the gym and this year you see everybody in the gym. Nobody takes their off days. Last year was really cool and stuff, but we're ready to go again." □

For three seasons, Florida State's offense ran through guard Ta'Niya Latson—and the Seminoles were pretty good. But the nation's leading scorer in 2024–25 was in search of a bigger challenge. There was one obvious place to find it: South Carolina

FEELING COCKY

25
26

BASKETBALL PREVIEW

NOVEMBER 2025
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

BY
Michael Rosenberg

PHOTOGRAPH BY
Jeffery A. Salter

The game had not yet begun, but Derek Latson was pretty sure his daughter's season was over. Ta'Niya Latson had done so much in her three years at Florida State. She led the nation in scoring. She was named first-team All-ACC three times and a second-team All-American. Now here she was, leading the sixth-seeded Seminoles into a second-round game against third-seeded LSU, which raised the question:

Who were they kidding?

"I knew they were outmatched," Derek says. "I knew she was going to do what she had to do, but I just knew that it was probably gonna be it."

Ta'Niya scored 30 points that day. Her team lost, 101–71, anyway. Three days later, she put her name in the transfer portal. Ten days after that, Connecticut ran Dawn Staley's South Carolina team off the floor in the NCAA championship game, largely because the Huskies had more players who could create their own shots.

Staley and Latson were such an obvious match that even if they hadn't expressed interest in each other, a mutual friend would have tried to set them up on a blind date, which is kind of what happened: Gamecocks guard Raven Johnson played high school ball with Latson in Georgia. Her pitch to Latson: "Let's go win a championship."

Johnson did not have to explain why they could. In the last four years, the Gamecocks have won as many games in the Final Four (five) as they have lost in the months leading up to it. Over the last six seasons, they are 202–13 overall.

Derek told his daughter, "You've got to get somewhere for *you* now." Ta'Niya considered a few other schools in a lists-are-fun-so-why-not-make-one? sort of way. But UConn was too far from home. While Tennessee has been reestablishing itself as a superpower, the Lady Vols lasted only one round longer than Florida State last year. She did not give herself a chance to fall in love with Texas or LSU. She didn't visit any schools—not even South Carolina.

"She just said this is where she wants to be," Staley says.

THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES

"It doesn't happen like that very often—for us or anybody else. It happens that way for people who have clarity on what they want."

Now South Carolina is the favorite to win the national title, which would be its fourth under Staley, who's entering her 18th season. Latson could have kept rolling the dice at Florida State, or she could join the team with hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place. But she is seeking something besides a championship—something more subtle. She believes that by playing for a team that needs her less, she will be compelled to do more.

ROOKE WYCKOFF did just about everything that a coach is supposed to do. As an assistant at Florida State, she built a relationship with Latson early, before every major power was recruiting her. Latson became a top-20 recruit, but she chose the Seminoles largely because of their bond, and she stuck with her commitment after Wyckoff was promoted to head coach.

Wyckoff put the ball in Latson's hands as a freshman. She supported her and promoted her and challenged her. They made three straight NCAA tournaments together. Latson left anyway.

"It was very difficult," Latson says. "I love Florida State. That's my heart."

When a transfer is considering her program, Staley always asks: *Why are you leaving?* "I want to make sure that I'm able to deliver [on] the reason why she's leaving," the coach says. Latson easily could have said she wanted to win a national title and left it at that.

"She said she had a great situation there," Staley says. "It was great. But she also knew that she would probably have to play the same role as she played for three years."

A star on a pretty good team accumulates an unhealthy amount of power, and Latson realized she did not always use hers wisely.

"My first two years, I did not take the weight room serious," Latson says. "I just wanted to play."

As for her defense … "Last year, it was really on me," Latson says. "[Wyckoff] did push me to play defense. She did. It was just knowing how much I could give. I took off reps on the defensive end. I had to hold myself accountable."

Is it fair to say she occasionally coasted because she could get away with it?

"That's fair," Latson says. But she was also stretched thin carrying the offense. "I just needed a change after last year, to challenge myself," she says. (Wyckoff declined a request to talk to SPORTS ILLUSTRATED for this story.)

There was a time when a player in Latson's sneakers would put herself through a thorough self-examination entering her senior year. Ask some now-or-never questions. Commit to greatness. The leap in maturity from junior to senior year was an essential part of the collegiate athlete's journey. Now it's just one option among many.

Last season Latson found herself watching South Carolina every chance she got. She told herself it was because the Gamecocks were one of the nation's best teams, or that she was keeping up with her friend Raven. But in retrospect, she says, "I was unconsciously looking at ways to grow my game. I knew what I wanted just by watching them."

Once Latson started thinking about leaving, it was hard to stop. Even in the best-case scenario, Florida State will not be a better team than South Carolina. Wyckoff is not a better coach than Staley. She will not prepare Latson better for the pros. FSU does not have more money, more support or a better training staff. Latson had friends there, sure, but she had friends at South Carolina, too.

The main reason to stay in Tallahassee was that she was already there—and even that was also a reason to leave. In a sense, her choice was not just between a top-25 program and a top-two powerhouse. It was between another year of undergrad basketball and hoops graduate school.

SHORTLY AFTER she arrived in Columbia, Latson noticed something. See if you can spot what it is.

Staley: "We're going to need her production. But it's just different."

BY *Elizabeth Swinton*

INTO ENEMY TERRITORY

For some college basketball transfers, a new team has an air of familiarity

SOMETIMES A fresh start is just 94 feet away. When Olivia Miles's senior season at Notre Dame ended in the Sweet 16, she knew she was bound for something more, whether it be in the WNBA (she was a projected lottery pick for the 2025 draft) or with a different collegiate team. TCU, the team to which the Fighting Irish lost, was a group defined by its roster of transfers, such as Hailey Van Lith, who were looking for a fresh start before going pro. That best fit, Miles thought, just happened to be with the squad that ended her season.

"I'd been in a spot for four and a half years, I have two degrees," says Miles, 22, who has a bachelor's in political science and a master's in nonprofit administration. "I really completed everything that I wanted to do there, so I just wanted a clean start."

As shocking of a decision as it was for fans—Miles says she "definitely" did not anticipate her move would get so much attention—TCU provides a solid foundation for her graduate season. A second-team All-American, Miles has a real chance to go far with Mark Campbell's program, which took home the Big 12 championship and reached the Elite Eight last year.

"I just love to hoop and, whether it's one person watching me or five million, I really couldn't care less," Miles says. "The joy of the game is enough for me."

By the end of last season, nearly 1,500 Division I women's basketball players entered the transfer portal, so Miles wasn't the only one to take a spot on an opponent's roster. Shortly after Miles

Latson: "We lifted [at FSU] but it's different in the SEC."

Staley: "Our program has produced pros. Not to say that Florida State doesn't. But it's just different."

Derek Latson, on his daughter's first few weeks in Columbia: "She was exhausted. She said the work is totally different."

Different sounded fantastic before Latson experienced it. Then it, um, hit different. Although almost everything at South Carolina is better—because it is better—any moment can seem worse. The strength program's fabled "Final Four Fridays" produce aches now and champions later. Staley acknowledges that Latson's transition wasn't "smooth," but that didn't come as a surprise.

"Competitors are wired a little differently," Staley says. "They anticipate having to go through some things, but they don't visualize bad days. So when it smacks them in the face, it doesn't feel good, right? But for me, I want it to keep smacking. When you can understand that this is what you're supposed to be going through right now, you embrace it."

There is a reason Staley has built a superpower in an era of constant upheaval: In a profession of control freaks, she maintains her poise. On the eve of South Carolina's Final Four matchup with Texas last spring, Staley said: "I'm talking to parents. I'm talking to people in the transfer portal. I'm talking to agents. It's a lot. But if you're not

decided on her next step, another surprising name popped up in the portal: South Carolina guard MiLaysia Fulwiley. Fresh off a championship game appearance, she made the decision to leave Columbia after two seasons for a familiar SEC foe: LSU.

Fulwiley had dazzled offensively (23 points off the bench in a Sweet 16 win over Maryland), but struggled to break through as a consistent presence on coach Dawn Staley's roster (11 minutes played in an Elite Eight win over Duke). The 5'10" junior, who went to high school just 10 miles from the Gamecocks' practice facility, has made the move to Baton Rouge and will put her trust in LSU coach Kim Mulkey to untap her potential. It was the culture that Mulkey built with the Tigers that appealed to Fulwiley, not to mention how well she'd fit alongside players such as guard Flau'jae Johnson.

"I want to show people that the little holes in my game don't define who I am," Fulwiley says.

There will likely be some extra juice when Fulwiley matches up against her former team on Feb. 14, but moves like hers and Miles's are becoming the norm in today's college basketball landscape.

The result? Instant cinema.

"It's gonna be a movie, man," Fulwiley says. "Y'all gotta stay tuned." □

FROM LEFT: JEFF BLAKE/IMAGN IMAGES; ELAINA EICHORN/NCAA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

FORMER FOES

Fulwiley (far left) faced LSU three times in two seasons as a Gamecock, while Miles played against TCU twice with the Irish, both last year.

someone that can easily pivot, this thing will swallow you up." While many coaches cling to their best players at the first sign of trouble, Staley employs a deeper rotation than any other top coach and sticks with it.

She convinces players it is in their best interest to pass, to defend and even to sit. Kamilla Cardoso did not start for the Gamecocks until she was a senior, at which point she became a second-team All-American, the NCAA tournament's Most Outstanding Player, and the No. 3 pick in the 2024 WNBA draft. Staley's players accept that she makes today harder so that tomorrow is easier. She racks up wins by playing the long game.

"Always," Staley says. "A lot of people don't understand that. The long game. The long game."

When Latson wobbled upon arrival, Staley just thought, *Better now than in February.*

"I'm like, 'It's just June!'" Staley says. "You gotta make her laugh about it, because it's hard. This is her life, this is her career. She's putting it all into us. I'm not a panicker."

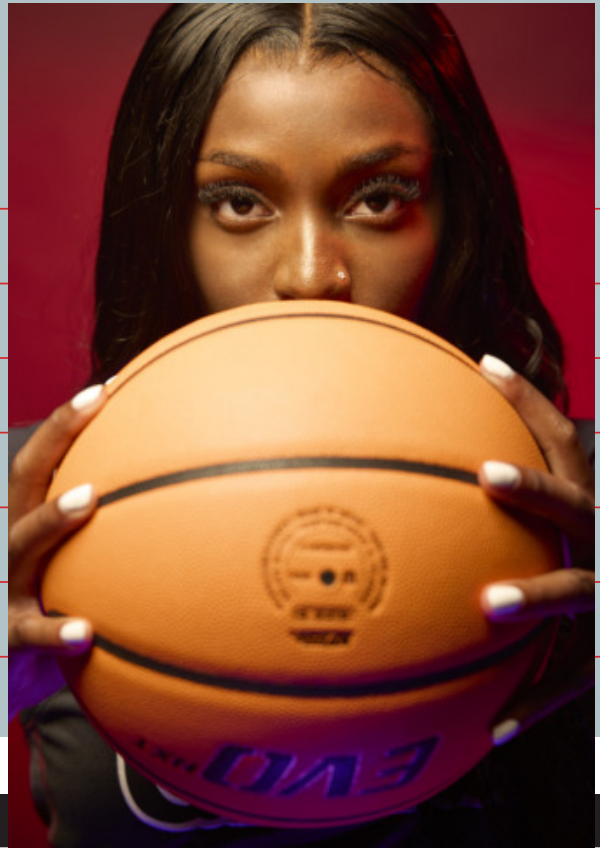
The 5' 8" Latson is an explosive offensive player; one of Staley's comps for her is Allen Iverson. Players of her type—quick feet, good handle, always thinking they can get a bucket—tend to have the same flaws. They go for steals (and potential fast breaks) instead of playing sound team defense. They fire up low-percentage shots because they haven't scored in a few possessions and they think it's their turn.

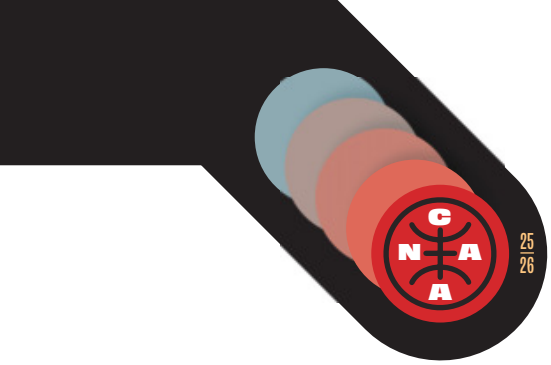
Some players—like Iverson—carry those flaws all the way to the Hall of Fame. But the moment Latson arrived at South Carolina, she was no longer a singular star. She was a player who was expected to meet the highest standard.

Latson said in September that "my jumping has gotten a lot better. My overall body, my structure, I feel I'm a lot stronger." Staley has pushed her to defend with positioning: "Less hands, more body. Put your strong body in front of someone and have them bounce off of you. She's mastered it."

That last part is what has impressed Staley as much as anything: "She picks up on things quickly, quickly, quickly. We're getting a seasoned senior." By the end of the summer, Latson already looked like a better player than when she arrived. But she hadn't played any games yet. And those will be different, too.

"SHE PICKS UP ON THINGS QUICKLY. WE'RE GETTING A SEASONED SENIOR," SAYS STALEY.





IN THREE SEASONS at Florida State, Latson averaged 21.3, 21.4 and 25.2 points per game. But in the last decade, only two Gamecocks averaged more than 16 points per game for a season—and those two (A'ja Wilson and Aliyah Boston) were no-argument No. 1 WNBA draft picks.

Funny thing about playing with stars like Chloe Kitts and Joyce Edwards: They want the ball, too. Latson is trying to improve on her passing, but the bigger challenge will be ignoring the box score. When Latson entered the portal, she surely did not think *I want to go help a team improve its spacing*. But that is part of her job now.

"Sometimes she's going to have to allow defenses to not think about her so much," Staley says. "Sometimes you gotta make them forget about you."

Latson must trust that the ball will come back her way eventually, because it will. Staley acknowledges that playing the long game is "hard with T, because it's the short game with her and us. But she's coming in with some things that naturally she does and naturally we don't have." In other words: T will get hers. Just not as often as she did before.

Latson knows this can go poorly. Hailey Van Lith was a superstar scoring guard at Louisville who transferred to LSU for a chance to play with more talent and become a better pro prospect, and it nearly broke her. After seeing her scoring average plummet to 11.6 points per game and her shooting percentage drop to 37.8%, Van Lith transferred again the next year, to TCU, where the Big 12 Player of the Year had a career-high shooting percentage of 45.2%.

There will be hard days, even when South Carolina wins. But Staley will remind Latson: the long game. Playing Latsonball for another 10 years was never a career option. Wilson, the Aces star and four-time league MVP, had the highest usage rate in the WNBA this regular season; she finished 30.7% of her team's possessions when she was on the floor. Latson's usage rate at Florida State last season was more than 38%. She averaged more field goals (19.5) and free throws (7.8) last season than anybody in the WNBA this year.

Win or lose, South Carolina will prepare Latson for professional life. But who are we kidding? At South Carolina, it's win or win. □

JEFFERY A. SALTER

Sports Illustrated

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TIP-INS

Look for the programs that lost in the finals last season to take their turn at cutting down the nets this time around

OVERALL RECORDS, CONFERENCE FINISHES AND NCAA TOURNAMENT RESULTS FROM 2024-25 SEASON

MEN'S TOP 25

ALEX SLITZ/GETTY IMAGES

1. **HOUSTON**
35-5 (19-1) • NCAA final

2. **UCONN**
24-11 (14-6) • Round of 32

3. **FLORIDA**
36-4 (14-4) • NCAA champion

4. **DUKE**
35-4 (19-1) • Final Four

5. **PURDUE**
24-12 (13-7) • Sweet 16

6. **ST. JOHN'S**
31-5 (18-2) • Round of 32

7. **TEXAS TECH**
28-9 (15-5) • Elite Eight

8. **LOUISVILLE**
27-8 (18-2) • Round of 64

9. **BYU**
26-10 (14-6) • Sweet 16

WOMEN'S TOP 25

1. **SOUTH CAROLINA**
35-4 (15-1) • NCAA final

2. **UCONN**
37-3 (18-0) • NCAA champion

3. **UCLA**
34-3 (16-2) • Final Four

4. **TEXAS**
35-4 (15-1) • Final Four

5. **LSU**
31-6 (12-4) • Elite Eight

6. **TENNESSEE**
24-10 (8-8) • Sweet 16

7. **OKLAHOMA**
27-8 (11-5) • Sweet 16

8. **DUKE**
29-8 (14-4) • Elite Eight

9. **NC STATE**
28-7 (16-2) • Sweet 16

10. **MICHIGAN**
23-11 (11-7) • Round of 32

11. **NORTH CAROLINA**
29-8 (13-5) • Sweet 16

12. **IOWA STATE**
23-12 (12-6) • Round of 64

13. **OLE MISS**
22-11 (10-6) • Sweet 16

14. **MARYLAND**
25-8 (13-5) • Sweet 16

15. **MICHIGAN STATE**
22-10 (11-7) • Round of 32

16. **WASHINGTON**
19-14 (9-9) • First Four

17. **IOWA**
23-11 (10-8) • Round of 32

18. **KENTUCKY**
23-8 (11-5) • Round of 32

19. **TCU**
34-4 (16-2) • Elite Eight

20. **VANDERBILT**
22-11 (8-8) • Round of 64

21. **KANSAS STATE**
28-8 (13-5) • Sweet 16

22 **NOTRE DAME**
28-6 (16-2) • Sweet 16

23. **RICHMOND**
28-7 (17-1) • Round of 32

24. **OKLAHOMA STATE**
25-7 (14-4) • Round of 64

25. **PRINCETON**
21-8 (12-2) • First Four

10. **KENTUCKY**
24-12 (10-8) • Sweet 16

11. **KANSAS**
21-13 (11-9) • Round of 64

12. **MICHIGAN**
27-10 (14-6) • Sweet 16

13. **ARIZONA**
24-13 (14-6) • Sweet 16

14. **ARKANSAS**
22-14 (8-10) • Sweet 16

15. **ILLINOIS**
22-13 (12-8) • Round of 32

16. **TENNESSEE**
30-8 (12-6) • Elite Eight

17. **UCLA**
23-11 (13-7) • Round of 32

18. **WISCONSIN**
27-10 (13-7) • Round of 32

19. **AUBURN**
32-6 (15-3) • Final Four

20. **VIRGINIA**
15-17 (8-12) • Missed tournament

21. **NORTH CAROLINA**
23-14 (13-7) • Round of 64

22 **MICHIGAN STATE**
30-7 (17-3) • Elite Eight

23. **OHIO STATE**
17-15 (9-11) • Missed tournament

24. **GONZAGA**
26-9 (14-4) • Round of 32

25. **IOWA STATE**
25-10 (13-7) • Round of 32

ERICK W. RASCO

Lauren Betts

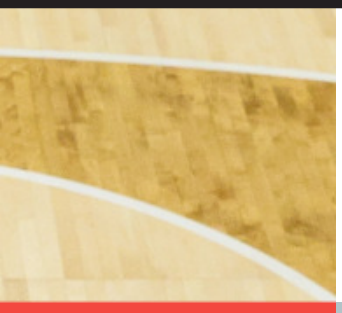
UCLA

The 6'7" center is the kind of sure thing around which franchises are built. Last season she averaged 20.2 points (on 64.8% shooting), 9.5 rebounds and 2.9 blocks per game.

WNBA DRAFT PREVIEW

The Bruins and Huskies each have two players among the top prospects

BY ***Kristen Nelson***



2

Azzi Fudd

UCONN

Her injury history (including multiple ACL tears) makes her a slight gamble, but the 5'11" guard's 43.6% shooting from three and smooth jump shot will be too enticing to pass up.

3

Olivia Miles

TCU

With 15.4 points and 5.8 assists at Notre Dame last season—coming off an ACL tear—the point guard, now at TCU, might have been the No. 2 pick if she had entered the 2025 draft.

4

Ta'Niya Latson

SOUTH CAROLINA

The nation's leading scorer last year at Florida State transferred to a program that will elevate her profile and demonstrate just how the 5'8" guard fits in on an elite roster.

5

Flau'jae Johnson

LSU

The 5'10" guard has averaged double digits in each of her three seasons with the Tigers—including a career-high 18.6 points last year—and she is a potent rebounder as well.

6

Cotie McMahon

OLE MISS

The 6-foot forward showed newfound three-point range last year (37.4%) at Ohio State. This year in the SEC, her physicality will likely be the focal point of the Rebels' game plan.

C. MORGAN ENGEL/NCAA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

7

Awa Fam

VALENCIA

The 6'4" Spaniard is just 19 years old and will likely be something of a project, but her combination of size and athleticism is rare enough that she can still help a team right away.

8

Serah Williams

UCONN

One of the top defensive bigs in the country, the 6'4" forward had 19.2 points, 9.8 rebounds and 2.4 blocks per game last year for Wisconsin in a tough Big Ten.

9

Ashlon Jackson

DUKE

As the Blue Devils' primary perimeter weapon last year, the 6-foot guard tied a school record with 87 threes made while shooting 37.2% from beyond the arc.

10

Gianna Kneepkens

UCLA

The career 43.2% three-point shooter transferred from Utah, where she averaged 19.3 points last season. Her efficiency should entice a W team in need of perimeter help.

GAMES TO WATCH

BY *Kevin Sweeney*

MEN

NOV. 13
PURDUE at **ALABAMA**

➔ The Boilermakers' season opener will be a big test for a squad that enters the year with title expectations, and it features a juicy point guard battle between Braden Smith *(left)* and Labaron Philon. Even football-crazed Alabama fans will be zeroed in on this one.

NOV. 18
DUKE vs. **KANSAS** in New York City

➔ Darryn Peterson vs. Cameron Boozer at Madison Square Garden? Sign us up. This year's Champions Classic gives us a monster matchup between the bluest of blue-chip programs, each led by a prospect competing to be the No. 1 pick in the 2026 NBA draft.

NOV. 25
HOUSTON vs. **TENNESSEE** in Las Vegas

➔ This game is the crown jewel of the burgeoning Players Era Festival, an 18-team event in Las Vegas featuring many top players and programs. Seeing potential top-five pick Nate Ament take on the defense of the preseason No. 1 Cougars should be fun.

FEB. 6
UCONN at **ST. JOHN'S**

➔ The teams both have elite rosters and polarizing coaches, and it will feel like an old-time prizefight when these Big East foes light up the arena on a Friday night. UConn will be out for payback after being swept by the Red Storm last season.

MARCH 7
FLORIDA at **KENTUCKY**

➔ This looks to be Florida's toughest road game in SEC play, and it comes on the final day of the league's regular season, so it's possible that this meeting could decide the conference title. Last year's edition was a 106–100 barnburner won by the Wildcats.

FROM LEFT: MARC LEBRYK/IMAGN IMAGES; KRISTEN YOUNG/LSU/UNIVERSITY IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

BY *Kristen Nelson*

WOMEN

NOV. 26
UCLA vs. **TEXAS** in Las Vegas

➔ A pair of last year's Final Four teams are looking to run it back. The Longhorns are led by the backcourt duo of Madison Booker and Rori Harmon, while the Bruins added a second towering Betts (Lauren's younger sister, Sienna) to the fold.

JAN. 15
TEXAS at **SOUTH CAROLINA**

➔ The Gamecocks lost just one conference game last year, with the Longhorns snapping coach Dawn Staley's 57-game SEC regular-season winning streak. But South Carolina took its revenge on Texas in the SEC tournament final and the Final Four.

FEB. 1
TENNESSEE at **UCONN**

➔ The Lady Vols reignited this rivalry last February when they beat the Huskies for the first time since 2007, downing the eventual champs, 80–76. Can Kim Caldwell's high-octane offense take down Geno Auriemma's squad two years in a row?

FEB. 14
SOUTH CAROLINA at **LSU**

➔ This matchup has become must-watch TV lately, but this year's added wrinkle—former Gamecock MiLaysia Fulwiley joins Flau'jae Johnson *(left)* in purple and gold—makes it personal. One team's fans will experience heartbreak this Valentine's Day.

FEB. 15
NORTH CAROLINA at **DUKE**

➔ These Tobacco Road rivals met in the Sweet 16 last March and delivered a low-scoring nail-biter in which Duke prevailed 47–38. As two of the ACC's top contenders this season, the Tar Heels and Blue Devils should deliver another gritty defensive battle.

BY *Emma Baccellieri*

GETTING AN EARLY START

The thriving Unrivaled league is increasing its influence by connecting with players who are still in college

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON has always loved a vision board. "I get all the cutouts that I want," she says. "I'm like, *This is what I want my life to look like*." Now entering her senior season at LSU, preparing for professional hoops, Johnson has never had more choices of just what to cut and paste onto her board.

Her fellow top players may not all be planning their careers in quite the same way. But they're all sharing in the same feeling of possibility. They're watching as the WNBA rides a major growth wave and negotiates a new collective bargaining agreement. They're weighing the opportunity presented by Unrivaled, the 3×3 league founded by WNBA players Napheesa Collier and Breanna Stewart, which began play during the W offseason last January and has since announced expansion and a new round of investment to bring its valuation to $340 million. They're looking at how best to convert their NIL deals into ongoing professional sponsorships. In short, they're figuring out how they will navigate a world that did not exist when they entered college.

The changing futures of this group may be the best way to measure the growth of women's basketball. Most who entered college at the dawn of NIL in 2021 or '22 were made to believe that their spotlight and marketability would never be greater than it was under the NCAA. The professional futures that followed could be expected to involve low pay and limited choices. But that has changed enormously over the years they have spent in college.

The fact that players like Johnson have never before had these types of opportunities suggests that she has the right idea with her vision board. A five-year plan is not useful in an environment where things change so quickly. Older pros can still be helpful resources, but their own careers don't exactly serve as useful examples. They never had these choices. And if any dream feels too lofty for the vision board now, Johnson's generation might only have to wait a few years. "You've got to create your own blueprint," says Johnson, who has been in national commercials for brands from Powerade to Samsung to Experian and is also a rapper signed to Roc Nation. "There's no model ... I feel like we're more so the model that people will follow."

THE CONTOURS of that shifting dynamic were captured most clearly over a weekend summit held this summer. More than a dozen of the best players in women's college basketball descended on the Unrivaled league campus in Miami. Each had signed a deal that would have been difficult to explain just a few years ago.

As the NCAA's definition of *amateurism* has shifted over the last decade, there is one part of the concept that has remained untouched, not to mention relatively

DOMESTIC TRANQUILITY

Johnson (opposite) and Texas forward Madison Booker, the reigning SEC Player of the Year, are among the players who have partnered with the U.S.-based Unrivaled.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF UNRIVALED; ERICK W. RASCO

GIVE A HOOT

Rice (right) hopes to join Skylar Diggins (above), who led Lunar Owls to Unrivaled's best regular-season record, as one of the burgeoning league's elite players.

RICH STORRY/GETTY IMAGES

unquestioned: College athletes can sign lots of contracts to be paid lots of money for lots of different activities. But they still cannot sign a contract with a pro sports league involving pay (or promises of future pay) for their athletic skill. In that last clause, however, Unrivaled saw an opportunity. A pro league cannot pay college basketball players to play basketball. But it could try paying them for being themselves.

So this summer brought news that Unrivaled had signed NIL deals with 14 of the best players in NCAA women's basketball. There was no commitment for players to join the league. Instead, the deals centered on the weekend summit in August, where the players donned Unrivaled merch, joined skill development sessions, participated in group bonding activities and took photographs and filmed videos. It was familiar material for players used to handling sponsorship deals and brand activations. Except here the brand in question was a league in which they might eventually play.

It felt novel on several levels. Unrivaled had not existed when many of these players enrolled in college. And the notion that women's basketball might sustain another domestic league that was not just operational, but also attractive enough to investors and flush enough with cash to actively court players? That represented the biggest shift of all.

"We're in a unique position where we can have that connective tissue with college athletes and just build the rapport early with them," says Unrivaled general manager Clare Duwelius. "That was kind of the focus for us as we reached out to different agents and players to see if they'd be interested in passing the baton to the next generation."

Unrivaled leadership originally decided on a list of 14 college players to which it would extend these NIL offers. The hope was to get 10 to say "yes." All 14 did.

Many of the players described the deal as obvious for them. They know they have choices right now. And they want to keep them open. "It's unbelievable, the amount of things that you can do now," says UCLA All-American senior center Lauren Betts.

That's strikingly different from the careers these players had imagined for themselves as girls. "Growing up, I always talked about wanting to play in the W," Betts says. "And I remember my parents telling me, 'Well, you can hope that you could play in the W forever, but you have to make a living as well, and you might have to go play overseas.'" That had always been the standard in women's basketball. Players made as much as 10 or 15 times a WNBA salary playing during the winter in countries like Russia, Turkey and China. It has been just a decade since Diana Taurasi's Russian team paid her $1.5 million to sit out the WNBA season and play exclusively overseas, a nearly impossible figure to refuse when her WNBA salary was just under what was then the league maximum of $107,000. The professional hoops aspirations of an entire generation were shaped by stories like that one.

But the best college players today find themselves with a very different outlook. The WNBA maximum salary is now $250,000 and is set to increase significantly again. (The current CBA was set to end on Oct. 31; negotiations

on a new agreement are framed by the 11-year, $2.2 billion media rights deal the league signed in July 2024.) Unrivaled was founded partially to relieve the strain that players experienced going overseas every winter: It offers a shorter season that starts later and finishes earlier than most international leagues, giving players a longer break without the stress of overseas travel. And for its first year, Unrivaled paid an average salary of roughly $220,000—more than double the WNBA's average. (Paige Bueckers, the W's 2025 No. 1 pick, signed an early version of an Unrivaled NIL deal giving her equity in the league while she was still in college. Upon turning pro, she signed a three-year deal to play in Unrivaled, where she will earn more in her first year than in all four seasons of her WNBA rookie contract. Johnson signed a similar equity deal last December.) If players long felt like they scarcely had one viable pathway to a career, they now feel like they have the freedom to pick from different options in charting their own.

"You can't really look at people ahead of you, because it was a little different for them," says UConn graduate student guard Azzi Fudd. "But you're always being grateful for them and giving them their flowers and thanking them whenever you can, because without them, none of this would be possible for us."

THERE IS freedom in choice. Players can afford to be more selective about the opportunities they pursue and the deals they make. By the time they turn pro, they have spent years navigating brand deals, getting more comfortable asserting themselves and figuring out how to build the kinds of careers they want.

"Everything's a learning opportunity," Fudd says after taking part in an Unrivaled photo op. "So if something happened in this shoot that I didn't like—O.K., cool. Next time I know what to ask for, I know what not to ask for."

And they do not feel quite so constrained by time pressure as some of their predecessors did. The message in women's basketball had been: *There will never be a platform for you as big as the one you will have in college*. A stronger audience for pro hoops, and more lucrative opportunities to go along with them, have changed that dynamic.

"It's not just the years in college that we have to make money," says UCLA senior guard Kiki Rice. "It's after that. And I think that's what we all feel like we deserve."

Their careers have already looked different than any that came before them. And they're just fine with that. Says Johnson with a grin, "I always say I was born at the right time." □

ERICK W. RASCO

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The volatile Knight (in plaid jacket), here huddling his troops against Marquette, insisted on an all-for-one team approach.

In 1976 Indiana won the NCAA title to complete the seventh undefeated history. That no team since has matched the Hoosiers' feat reflects

PERFECT RECALL

season in Division I men's college hoops just how much the game has changed

BASKETBALL PREVIEW

NOVEMBER 2025
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

CONSIDER IT either a referendum on the school's vitality and popularity ... or on its meager state funding and therefore dorm space. But, Lord almighty, does Indiana University come dense with off-campus housing. So much so that, charming as it is, Bloomington, Ind., can present less as a Midwest college town than as a collection of apartments, townhouses and villas, with a major state university tacked on.

Having realized years ago that there was—and is—a fortune to be made as a developer catering to students, Scott May is among the largest real estate holders in town, the baron of thousands of rentable apartment units. Which is ironic because there was a time when May's dalliance with Bloomington apartment living imperiled one of the signature events in IU history: the 1975–76 Hoosiers' perfect 32–0 basketball season, the last time a Division I men's college team went baseline to baseline without losing a game.

But in the fall of 1975—an even 50 years ago—May and fellow Indiana senior Quinn Buckner made the unilateral decision to leave the dorms and move off campus. Unilateral in the sense that they did not first confer with their team's head coach. When Bob Knight found out about this relocation plan, he was, in keeping with his default emotion, livid.

Knight blasted the players for their selfishness, for the bad habits that, surely, would befall 21-year-olds leaving the college environment to live on their own. As Buckner once recalled to SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: "He told us we weren't

BY
L. Jon Wertheim

PHOTOGRAPH BY
Rich Clarkson

sleeping right and eating right. And you know what? He was right. We moved back into the dorm."

A few months after that—well-rested, well-nourished and well-integrated into the campus at large—May and Buckner, team co-captains, were on the floor at the Spectrum in Philadelphia when Indiana closed out its perfect season. The players felt exultant. And relieved. And vindicated, having righted the injustice of the previous season.

The idea that a pair of seniors moving out of dorms into (horrors!) an off-campus apartment would arouse their coach's wrath? Today, of course, it scans as downright quaint. But consider the historical sports context. This was the mid-70s, a time when Nike was just an upstart company with a name from Greek mythology; ESPN had yet to be founded; and NIL would have been recognized only as a possible score in an overseas soccer match.

This was still a time when it was considered a fair exchange for varsity athletes to be given scholarships and textbooks in return for providing sports services. The idea that a player would leave college before four seasons of eligibility and enter the NBA was perceived as an act of fierce disloyalty. It was similarly unthinkable that schools would scour the country—never mind the world—recruiting talent; Indiana's entire roster of players that gilded season came from within the state or a bordering one.

"We were bred a little differently," says Bob Wilkerson, also a senior starter on the '75–76 team. "We knew it would be four years that we would be there. For me, I didn't realize I would be in the army, but, hell, I learned quickly. You do what you're told and you try to learn, but you never think about quitting."

Players dressed down for living off campus? Staying at school for four years? Made to feel like soldiers at boot camp, yet rarely even considering transferring? Stories like this encapsulate just how much time has elapsed since the last Division I men's hoops team turned in an undefeated season, and just how much the balance of power today has shifted toward the athletes. They also go a long way toward explaining why no team has since replicated the Hoosiers' feat.

THE TITLE ITSELF came in 1976. But the propulsive thrust of the story behind the last undefeated team in D-I men's basketball history comes from the year before. Heading into the 1975 tournament, Indiana was the consensus favorite, having blitzed through the season with a 29–0 record. But in the final game of the Big Ten season, May, Indiana's best player, broke his left arm.

FOUR (YEARS) ON THE FLOOR

Today, they'd likely be one-and-done lottery picks, but May (above, fighting for real estate against UCLA) and Benson stayed through their senior seasons.

Indiana played Kentucky in the Elite Eight in Dayton, Ohio, an easy drive from both Bloomington and Lexington. Recent history added to the intensity. The Hoosiers had not only humiliated the Wildcats, 98–74, when they'd played earlier that season, but before that game, Indiana's impulse-control-challenged coach had slapped his Kentucky counterpart, Joe B. Hall, on the back of the head, and then declined to offer a full apology. ("If it was meant to be malicious," Knight said afterward, "I'd have blasted him into the seats.")

Facing a fully motivated opponent and with the team's best player consigned to a cast and playing only seven minutes, Indiana lost 92–90. The Hoosiers would end their season in a funereal locker room, only the players' sobs piercing the quiet. Until his death in November 2023, Knight would refer to this team as the best he'd ever coached.

Though May and, likely, redheaded sophomore center Kent Benson, would have been the equivalent of NBA lottery picks in 1975, neither considered leaving school. Instead,

JAMES DRAKE

RICH CLARKSON

they and the other starters returned to Bloomington hell-bent on another run at the title.

From their candy-cane warmups to the overwhelming smell of popcorn inside the home arena—the prosaically named Assembly Hall—there was something decidedly throwback about the 1975–76 Indiana Hoosiers.

Above all, this was a classic example of a team greater than its component parts. They played a man-to-man defense in which each player was expected to help others when his man was off the ball. They passed up good shots for wide-open ones. With no three-point line, they put a premium on open lanes and easy looks in the low post.

It's not that there weren't fine players on the roster. All five starters would make it to the NBA. But there was strength in the unity, that sixth sense for knowing where the others would be on the court at all times. And while most teams say they are, this was one that was genuinely indifferent to who scored how many points, provided the team won.

Buckner could—and sometimes did—put up 20 points in a game; other times he'd direct the offense and barely score. Benson, an All-American, may have been the country's best center but often went an entire game without attempting 10 shots. Wilkerson, a wildly versatile swingman, could—and did—grab 19 rebounds in a single game. Other times, he'd defend the opposing point guard on the perimeter. Even today, the players—now in their early 70s—reflect on the season by first referencing the team bonds, eager to deflect praise in the direction of a teammate.

(Digression: In reporting this story, I reached out to Benson and left a message on his voicemail. Within half an hour, he not only called back, but did so *with Wilkerson patched in*, happy to speak but on the condition that teammates from 50 years ago would also have their voices included.)

Inasmuch as there was a star attraction—and a source of tension—it was the team's coach. Shortly before the season began, Bob Knight had celebrated his 35th birthday. In 1971, the same year Assembly Hall opened, Indiana had hired Knight from West Point—where he'd been named Army's head coach at the preposterous age of 24. So by 1975–76, he was already in his fifth season in Bloomington and had already taken a team to the Final Four. What's more, his reputation both as a singular hard-ass and singular basketball savant already had spread nationally.

When addressing the players, Knight was as likely to reference George Patton or Douglas MacArthur—his military heroes—as he was Pete Newell or Clair Bee, his basketball heroes.

Even in his mid-30s, Knight, clad in a red plaid sport coat, cut an outsized figure, equally demigod and demagogue. Still, for all the ink spilled about him, you find no references to his mulling competing job offers from deeper-pocketed schools or NBA franchises. "People talked about whether he would be the U.S. Olympic coach [which Knight was in 1984]," longtime Bloomington sports journalist Bob Hammel recalled to me, not long before his death this summer at age 88. "But even the most successful coaches weren't looking for better job offers and other schools weren't looking to [poach] them."

With that built-in stability, Knight was able to recruit the kind of players he wanted and felt he could nurture

and nourish over four years. And the players could commit, secure in the assumption that there would be no convulsive change in coach or culture. "In other words, you knew what you were signing up for," Buckner, one of Knight's first recruits, once told me. "But it also meant everyone kind of grew up together."

A few days after the 1975 loss to Kentucky, Knight received a handwritten letter from Bee, a pioneer of the game at LIU-Brooklyn who had become a mentor to Knight early in his career. From his home in Monticello, N.Y., Bee wrote in part: "Take a deep breath. Get your bearings. Set your sights on even greater heights and start all over again."

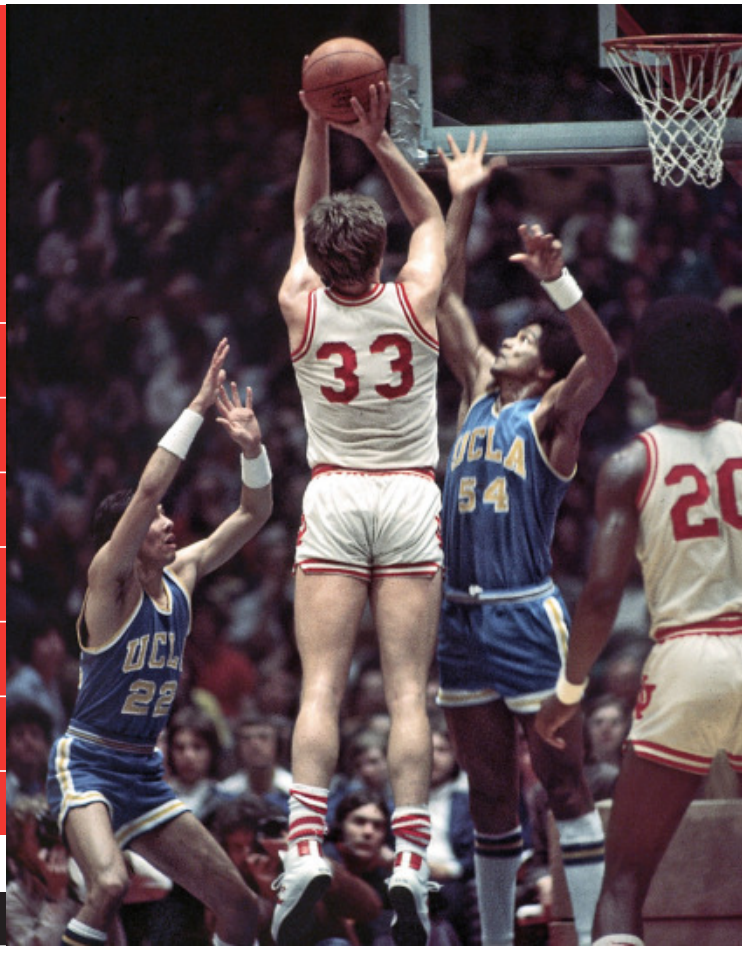
Knight took this to heart, challenging his team not just to avenge the defeat by winning the national title, but to become the seventh team in NCAA history—the previous *four* were from UCLA—to turn in a perfect season.

Says Benson: "It wasn't like we woke up in the middle of the season and were like, *We're 15–0! Wow, maybe we can keep this up.* No, [going undefeated] was a goal from the start."

The 1975–76 Hoosiers do not stand accused of padding the preconference schedule with cupcake games. The consensus preseason No. 1 team, Indiana started its campaign with a game against the Soviet national squad, which controversially had won gold at the 1972 Olympics. Technically it was an exhibition game, but it came freighted with real significance. The game was held at Market Square Arena in downtown Indianapolis and played before a sellout crowd of 17,377. (The Pacers, the venue's full-time tenants, would draw an average of 5,556 fans that season.) Despite playing against men who were in some cases a decade their seniors, Indiana won 94–78.

In the first regular-season game, Indiana faced No. 2 UCLA, the defending NCAA champions. This marked the Bruins' first game since the retirement of John Wooden, and this clash of basketball superpowers was held in St. Louis. Broadcast on NBC, the matchup marked the first made-for-national-television college hoops game in history. Clearly the best player on the court, May scored 33 points and Indiana rolled 84–64.

THE '76 HOOSIERS FORMED A TEAM GREATER THAN ITS PARTS.



Indiana then headed back to Market Square Arena to face Florida State. The Seminoles' coach, Hugh Durham, offered this pregame gem: "They beat Russia to prove they're the best in the world. And they beat UCLA to prove they're the best in the United States. Now I'd like to see them prove they're human and have a bad game." No such luck. Indiana won 83–59.

Next up: eighth-ranked Notre Dame at home, a game the Hoosiers didn't so much win as they stole, 63–60. Four days later, an appointment in Louisville with Kentucky. Though it was a wholly different Wildcats team, Indiana viewed this as a rematch of the heartbreaking Elite Eight matchup from the previous season. "No way we were losing that," says senior forward Tom Abernethy. And they didn't. It was a choppy game, but Benson slapped a missed shot into the hoop at the end of regulation to force overtime. Then Indiana pulled away, winning 77–68.

The Hoosiers started conference play without a Big Ten loss since March of 1974. They kept the streak alive, winning a tight game at Ohio State, 66–64, Knight matching up against his college coach, Fred Taylor. A week later, IU summoned its best moments when the situation required it, escaping with an 80–74 win at Michigan, generally regarded as the conference's second-best team.

The return engagement with the Wolverines in Bloomington proved to be the season's closest call. From the start, the Hoosiers were as flat as, well, Indiana, missing scads of shots and discomfited by Michigan's pressure. At one point, backup point guard Jim Wisman committed turnovers on two straight possessions. Knight yanked him—first from the game and then, literally, tugging the player's jersey almost to the point of ripping it.

With barely half a minute left in the game, the Wolverines led 60–56. Buckner's only field goal of the game trimmed the lead to 60–58. Michigan missed the front end of a one-and-one, May grabbed the rebound and IU called timeout with 10 seconds to go. With no shot clock, it was obvious that Indiana's best plan of attack was to hold the ball and give May the final shot. But when he was heavily defended, the ball ended up with Buckner, who fired and missed. Reserve guard Jim Crews retrieved the shot and flung it toward the basketball. Somehow Benson tapped the ball and sent it through the net as the buzzer sounded.

In 1976, a shot was good if it left a player's hands before the buzzer. A tip-in counted only if it was already in the basket when the buzzer sounded. The officials huddled and ruled that Benson's shot was a "shot," much to the dismay of Michigan coach Johnny Orr. Indiana then pulled away in overtime and won 72–67. Such is the margin between heartbreak and history.

Indiana headed to the postseason as the team to beat. The previous season, the NCAA had expanded its field from 25 to 32 teams, which meant that multiple schools from the same conference could make the field. But teams were divided by geography, not seeding. So No. 1 Indiana was placed in the Mideast region alongside No. 6 Alabama and No. 2 Marquette, whom the Hoosiers would have to beat in succession.

The 1976 Final Four was held in Philadelphia, a fitting site in the country's bicentennial. In the Final Four, Indiana had a rematch against UCLA. Before the game, the Hoosiers were taken aback by the braying of Bruins forward Richard Washington, who referred to Indiana's December win as "a fluke." This was precisely the kind of trash talk Knight would never abide. Indiana swarmed Washington, holding him to 15 points, and won handily 65–51.

The title game pitted Indiana against Michigan for the third time that season. Recent history fired the Hoosiers with confidence, secure as they were in the knowledge they had already beaten the team twice in the past few months. It also brought some trepidation; here was an opponent intimately familiar with their strengths and weaknesses. "No secrets between us," says Benson.

In the pregame meeting, Knight's college teammate John Havlicek, then nearing the end of his Hall of Fame NBA career, addressed the team. His message: *You don't want to look back. You don't want to regret the rebound you should have grabbed or the loose ball you didn't pursue with sufficient effort. Lay it all on the line tonight so you don't live with any regrets in the future.*

The game started inauspiciously for the Hoosiers. Less than three minutes in, Michigan's Wayman Britt went for a layup, Wilkerson trailing in pursuit. Britt inadvertently raked his elbow across the left temple of Wilkerson, who

TROUBLING THE BRUINS

A backup for three years, Abernethy (33) became a key starter as a senior, and in the Final Four he rose to the occasion with 14 points against defending champion UCLA.

RICH CLARKSON

fell to floor. Concussed, he was taken off on a stretcher and transported to Temple University Hospital, where he demanded to remain in his jersey and sweats, in case he might be summoned for the second half.

Owing to some combination of shock at seeing a teammate stretchered off, the weight of the moment and hot shooting by Michigan (60%), Indiana trailed 35–29 at halftime. Players recall that it all seemed unfair. *Their season, undented so far, was going to be ruined on the very last night? By a team that Indiana had already beaten twice? With another fluke injury?* In the locker room, Knight's halftime speech was a single sentence: "If you guys want to be champions and make history, you've got 20 minutes to prove it."

They did and they did. Playing to seize the title—not merely win it—Indiana, as SI writer Barry McDermott described it, played "with a flourish as conspicuous as John Hancock's signature." Turning in one of their strongest halves of the season, the Hoosiers didn't merely take the lead but expanded it to double figures.

Wilkerson's replacement, Wisman—the same player whose jersey Knight had grabbed the last time Indiana faced Michigan—played his best game of the season. May ended up with 26 points. Benson was good for 25 and took the Final Four Most Outstanding Player award. The final score, 86–68, punctuated a season of dominance. In the locker room, players wore scraps of net as necklaces.

"I feel so good," May, the consensus national player of the year, said at the time. "I can't even talk."

"Four beautiful years and it paid off with this," Buckner interjected. "Beautiful."

Outside the Spectrum, Hammel ran into Knight.

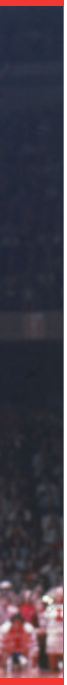
"Congratulations," said the journalist.

"Thanks, but it should have been two," Knight said, referencing the 1975 disappointment.

Then Knight and Havlicek headed off into the Philadelphia night. Not to a media appearance or some Broad Street watering hole or a private jet waiting. No, they went to the hospital to check on Wilkerson.

HERE ARE all sorts of ways to express 50 years as a function of time. Consider that more than 70% of the current U.S. population had not yet been born when Indiana won that title. The U.S. GNP in 1976 was $1.9 trillion. This year it will be roughly $30 trillion.

Framed in sports terms, in the last half century, there have been:



FROM TOP: JAMES DRAKE; RICH CLARKSON (2)

• Fifteen perfect games and seven unassisted triple plays in Major League Baseball.

• Four horses that have won racing's Triple Crown.

• Nine tennis players who have completed a career Grand Slam.

In March 1976, Gerald Ford was president, Muhammad Ali was still heavyweight champion, Tiger Woods was three months old.

Since 1976, five Division I men's college basketball teams have gone through the regular season undefeated. Ironically, the next to do so was Indiana State in 1979, led by Larry Bird, who had transferred from Indiana. The Sycamores, though, lost in the '79 final to Magic Johnson and Michigan State. Most recently, in 2021, Gonzaga was 31–0 heading into the title game before losing decisively to Baylor.

At the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, May and Buckner were starters on the U.S. basketball team that won back the gold medal. May (No. 2), Buckner (No. 7), and Wilkerson (No. 11) were early selections in the NBA draft. A year later Benson was the No. 1 pick.

IT'S TELLING that all five starters still live in Indiana, most with deep ties to Bloomington. May is a local developer. Benson lives in his hometown of New Castle and is a regular at IU basketball games and volleyball matches, as his daughter Ashley was an All-American for the Hoosiers in 2009. Buckner is president of the IU Board of Trustees. He is also VP of communications and a television analyst for the Pacers. Abernethy founded the Indiana Basketball Academy in Carmel. Wilkerson recently moved back to his hometown of Anderson, just under 100 miles from Bloomington.

On the continuum between records-are-made-to-be-broke indifference and 1972 Miami Dolphins arrogance, the Hoosiers have, with age, inched toward the latter.

"I don't think it's gonna happen again, at least not in our lifetime, so yeah, we take a lot of pride in it," says Wilkerson. Adds Benson: "There were [undefeated teams] before us, so maybe it wasn't that big a deal at first. But since we're talking 50 years now, yeah, it's a big source of pride, especially for all the IU fans."

GAME, SET AND UNMATCHED SINCE

In the final against Michigan, Wilkerson went down and out early (top) and the Hoosiers trailed at the half, but Buckner (21) and the Hoosiers blazed back to deliver Knight an 86–68 victory that put a punctuation mark on perfection.

The legacy has been made a bit more complicated—and more urgent—on account of the coach. Knight would guide Indiana to another national title five years later; and then another, six years after that. He would remain in Bloomington for 24 more years—too long, he would later concede—leaving after an ugly, public divorce.

The members of the 1976 title team remain fiercely loyal to their coach and seem to be in agreement that if his methods wouldn't fly today, well, the current culture is the worse for it. But players on other Indiana teams have been more critical and, nearly a quarter century after Knight's last game, the fabric of the Indiana basketball tapestry remains somewhat tattered.

Consider: Indiana is coming off a middling 19–13 season, which led to the departure of its coach, Mike Woodson—a former Hoosiers star from the late 1970s, hired in part to stir warm nostalgia for a simpler era. In addition to a new coach, Darian DeVries, the Hoosiers' roster is made up of 10 transfers, three freshmen and four walk-ons. Compare this to the stability and familiarity of the four four-year senior starters on the 1975–76 team.

To commemorate the golden anniversary of the undefeated team, the players have planned a series of events, speaking tours and media appearances. It's as much to celebrate a milestone as it is to rekindle the good vibes from a less complicated time, when Hoosier basketball was top in class and college sports were pure as Indiana corn.

WHETHER IT was the season's last bit of master psychology or simply his devotion to the job, after the 1976 final, Knight did not fly back to Indiana with his players. He left Philadelphia immediately to scout potential recruits at a national high school all-star game.

But he met up with the team a few days later at a celebration at Assembly Hall. Clogging the state roads that thread together Indiana's small towns, thousands of fans had taken off from work and school to toast the undefeated team.

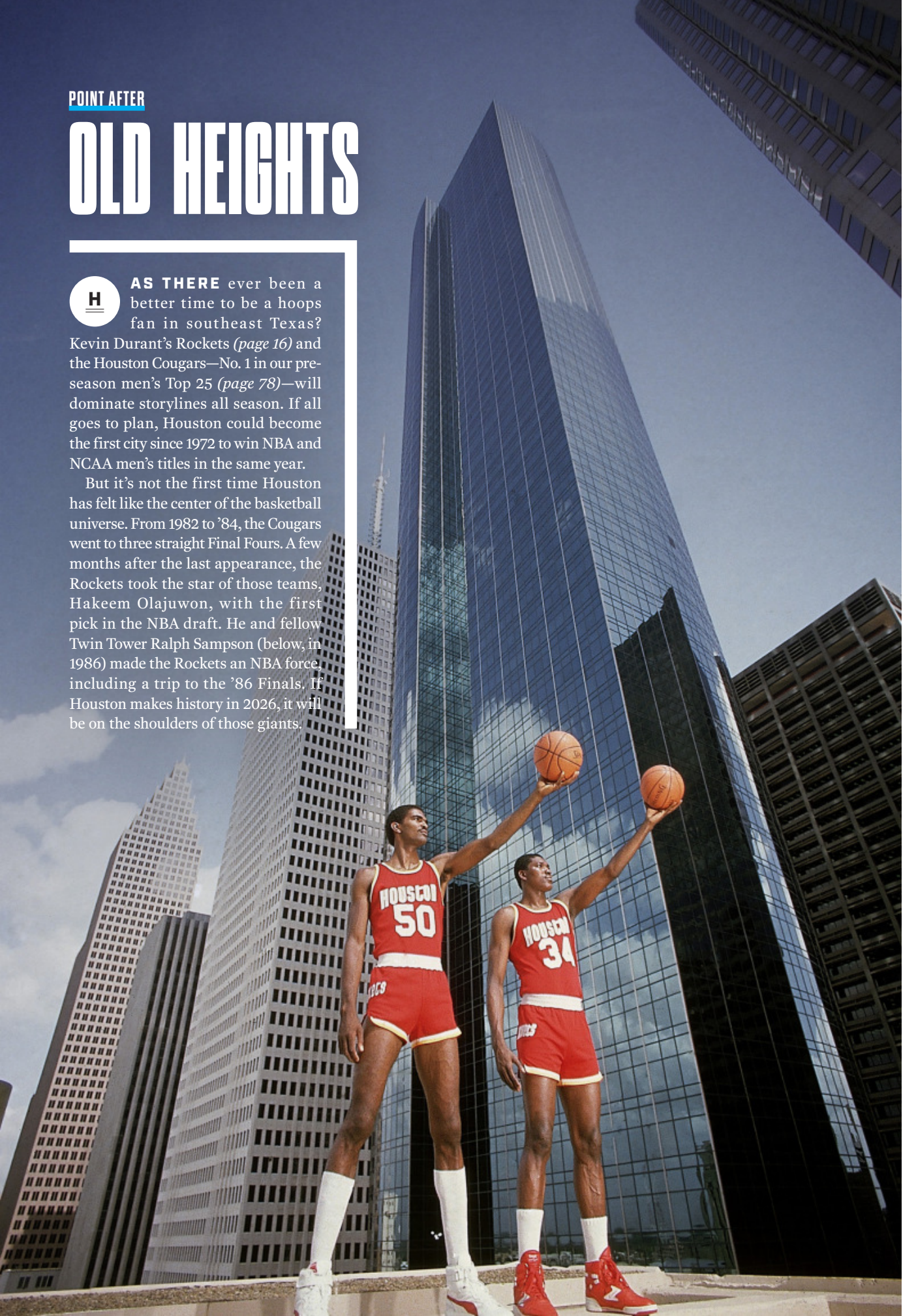
Dressed in street clothes, players took turns at the mic, offering thanks and cracking lighthearted jokes. When it was Knight's turn to speak, he kept his remarks short. "Take a look at this group one last time," he told the adoring crowd, "Because you're not gonna see a group like this again." □

POINT AFTER

OLD HEIGHTS

HAS THERE ever been a better time to be a hoops fan in southeast Texas? Kevin Durant's Rockets *(page 16)* and the Houston Cougars—No. 1 in our preseason men's Top 25 *(page 78)*—will dominate storylines all season. If all goes to plan, Houston could become the first city since 1972 to win NBA and NCAA men's titles in the same year.

But it's not the first time Houston has felt like the center of the basketball universe. From 1982 to '84, the Cougars went to three straight Final Fours. A few months after the last appearance, the Rockets took the star of those teams, Hakeem Olajuwon, with the first pick in the NBA draft. He and fellow Twin Tower Ralph Sampson (below, in 1986) made the Rockets an NBA force, including a trip to the '86 Finals. If Houston makes history in 2026, it will be on the shoulders of those giants.



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